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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

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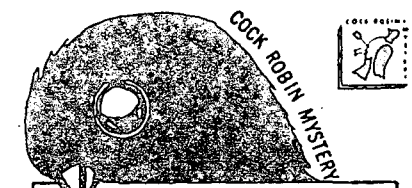

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EDITOR'S FILE CABINET

a new story by

AUTHOR: MICHAEL GILBERT

TITLE: *London Manhunt*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Petrella

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *British police procedure: an action story with that rare ingredient—"heart." Join Inspector Petrella on the trail of the most hated of criminals—cop killers.*

"I HOPE," SAID MISS POSTANCE COLDly, "that you're not going to suggest that Ronald is really a fifty-year-old man, or a girl, or a pair of Siamese twins, perhaps."

Miss Postance was the Assistant Probation Officer at Kennington. She was only twenty, an age of great natural intolerance, and she was particularly severe with Detective-Inspector Patrick Petrella, who had recently behaved unforgivably by concealing the fact that two of her protegées, whom she believed to be fifteen-year-old boys, were really a Polish safe breaker and his wife.

"No," said Petrella. "There's no mystery about Ronald. His mother lives in the Cut. Hop-picking in the summer, rag-picking in the winter. His father is thought to have been a plate-layer on the railway, but there's never been much certainty about that. Ronald's eighteen now, isn't he?"

"He'll be nineteen next Tuesday," said Miss Postance. "That's his birthday. Let's hope he can keep out of trouble till then."

"We'll all do our best."

"Mentally, he's only about twelve years old."

"He may be mentally twelve," said Petrella. "The trouble is that physically he's his full age and a

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bit more. However, I promise you that if he'll keep out of our way, we'll keep out of his."

Ronald Hart was something of a thorn in the flesh of X Division. He was a tall, strongly made young man, with thick black hair, a pleasant, if rather vacant face, and a full complement of his putative father's muscles; and he appeared to have objections to any work in any form.

This program of planned leisure left him with a balance of energy which he expended in tearing down advertisement hoardings, dismantling telephone booths, wrecking street lamps, and when all else failed, fighting with his disreputable friends. But on the whole, he only fought when he was drunk. Sober, Ronald was an easy-going person.

"I hope he can," said Miss Postance. "I do believe he's really trying now. He went to the cinema the other afternoon and sat right through the film. He didn't cut up any of the seats, either."

"Talking of cinemas, there's a very good film on at the Columbia. I wondered if this evening—"

"I'm not sure if I can manage this evening. I've got a lot of reports to write."

"Hang reports," said Petrella. "This is a gangster film. It'll cheer both of us up to see how much worse things are in America."

"Well, I might," said Miss Postance, "*if* I don't get any more callers between now and five o'clock, and *if* the Chief Probation Officer doesn't ring up, and *if* I can get through about half a dozen urgent reports."

"I'll take a chance on that," said Petrella. "If you find you can't turn up, I can always go by myself."

"Supposing something prevents *you* turning up?"

"It won't," said Petrella. "But if it does I'll telephone you."

In the light of this promise Miss Postance was understandably put out when Petrella failed to arrive at the appointed rendezvous. She waited, with growing displeasure, for half an hour. Then she swallowed her pride and telephoned Gabriel Street Station, only to get a "line engaged" signal.

When this had happened twice she called Petrella's rooms, and Mrs. Wetherall, who answered the telephone, said that he hadn't returned there either. So she telephoned the police station again, and for the third time got the busy signal.

At twenty to seven that evening Sergeant Lake had been waiting near the corner of Upper Dock Street and Gosforth Road. He was waiting for Police Constable Bates, who was due to make a point with him, after patrolling the warehouse area which lies between Gosforth Road, Lower Dock Street, and the river.

It was not the first time that Bates had been late at a point, and

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Sergeant Lake spent the first five minutes thinking out and stringing together a few of the things he intended to say to his subordinate. When a full five minutes had passed, he began to feel a prickle of uneasiness. He started slowly down Gosforth Road in the direction in which Bates was to come.

He had passed the third turning, a dark alley called Parkers Passage, which dived steeply from Gosforth Road to the river, when he heard something. It was a low, sighing noise, between a muttering and a groan, and it came from inside the mouth of the alley. He switched on his belt torch and saw Constable Bates lying face downward. For a moment he thought that Bates was drunk. Then he saw the dark pool of blood.

Superintendent Benjamin reached Gabriel Street with Chief Superintendent Thom, who was in command of all detective forces in Number 4 District.

Petrella said, "I can give you what we've got, sir. Bates was shot once, through the chest, at pretty close quarters, with a medium caliber gun of some sort. He couldn't have reached Parsons Passage before twenty-five to seven. Sergeant Lake got to the crossroads at twenty to seven. There was a lot of traffic, but he's quite sure he'd have heard a shot."

"Gosforth Road," said Benjamin. "That's warehouses, marine stores, small factories, workshops—that sort of thing. We'll cordon it until daylight—just in case."

Both men knew what was in his mind.

"I've got all the men I could lay hands on round it now," said Petrella. "and three cars are patrolling. If there's anyone still in there, they won't get out."

"Was there any sign of breaking and entering?" said Benjamin.

"Bates saw *something*," said Petrella. "His whistle was actually in his hand when he was shot. But he didn't have time to use it."

Benjamin said, "I'll send reinforcements, and reliefs, from M. Division right away. We'll keep the blockade up till first light, and then go in, and give it a proper going-over."

At six o'clock on the following morning Petrella, moving cautiously down the alley, tripped over a raised grating. Normally flush with the ground, it was now lying awkwardly asked. Closer inspection showed that the padlock had been twisted off and the retaining bolt drawn.

Petrella lifted the grating and lowered himself into the black pit. Ahead of him was a double wooden door. There were signs of forcing here, too. One of the doors was hanging loose.

Petrella said to Sergeant Morris, who was breathing down the back of his neck, "Hop up and see who this outfit belongs to. It's all right. I'm not going in till you get back.

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I'm not feeling heroic this morning."

"Silverstone Marine, Limited," reported Sergeant Morris. "Big outfit. Makes motor engines and such."

"All right," said Petrella. "Watch it."

He kicked open the door, dropped onto one knee, and clicked on his torch. Nothing happened. Ahead of him was a basement storeroom, full of what looked like heavy machinery, some crated, some loose.

"Awkward things to steal," said Petrella. "My guess is they just used this as a way in."

A few minutes later he and Sergeant Morris were in the office. This was in good order too, except that the tall green and gold safe had been lowered face downward onto a rolled-up carpet, and a circular hole had been cut in its back.

When Petrella reached Gabriel Street with the news, Superintendent Benjamin was finishing a telephone call. He sat there, in the uncharitable light of early morning, saying, "Yes. I see," and then, "I'm sure you did everything you could." There was a gray stubble round the fringes of his lined, bleak face. Petrella knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth.

"Bates died in hospital ten minutes ago. He didn't recover consciousness."

Petrella had nothing to say to that. He told Benjamin what he had discovered.

"There was no one on the premises. Morris and I gave it a quick search, then we put six men right through it."

"All right," said Benjamin. He thought for a few minutes in silence. Outside, the factory sirens were calling the early shift to work.

"Pull in the main cordon," he said. "Seal off the Silverstone premises, and get the print and photograph squads right down. Better warn the Managing Director. But we should get most of what we want by the time they open up."

He thought about it again. "I want another squad to get round all the places in Gosforth Road which have people living in them. Some of them are offices, but there are shops, too. And people living over the shops."

"In case they saw the getaway?"

"That's right. I'm assuming Bates spotted them climbing out of the grating with the money, or whatever it was they got out of the safe. They couldn't leave a car in Parsons Passage—it's too narrow. On the other hand, they wouldn't want to leave it too far away, either."

Petrella left the experts to work on the Silverstone premises, and himself took charge of the house-to-house search. He was not surprised to find that everyone he questioned knew exactly what had happened. Sharp eyes, peering be-

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tween net curtains, had observed and understood the police activity. No one seemed to have slept much.

It was at a tobacconist's shop, a full hundred yards from the alleyway, that he struck the spoor of the animals he was after.

The son of the tobacconist said that he had seen a car, parked opposite the shop. He had been on his way to the cinema, and had crossed the road to look at it, being interested in cars. It turned out to be a Steyr, a German make not common in this country. He was looking at it when three men came up and got in. One of them had told him to "—off," a piece of rudeness not common in his experience. He had noticed that two of the men were carrying heavy brief cases.

"Could you describe them?" asked Petrella.

The boy had only looked at the one who spoke to him. He was biggish and thickset, and had been wearing a raincoat and a hat turned down over his eyes. He had noticed that the man spoke with some difficulty, as though there was something wrong with his jaw, or his mouth.

"It's better than nothing, I suppose," said Benjamin. "There aren't a lot of outfits who could pull a smooth job like this. Look at the timing. The office shuts at half-past five. They must have given the employees a bit of time to get clear. But they were in and out by twenty-five to seven, having cut a big hole in that safe into the bargain."

Petrella found a minute that afternoon to telephone Miss Postance. Before he could apologize, she said, "I know all about it. Of course you weren't able to ring me up. I should have thought less of you if you had. I knew Joe Bates. You will catch the men who did it, won't you?"

Petrella said that they would do their best.

"And take care of yourself, too," said Miss Postance, and rang off.

After he had replaced the receiver, Petrella stood for a moment, considering this. Motherly landladies had occasionally put hot water bottles in his bed, and warned him about the dangers of the East wind; but he could not remember that any member of the female sex had ever expressed solicitude for him in quite such a direct and personal way. Oddly enough, he found he rather liked it.

It was difficult to say who first mentioned Ronald's name in connection with the murder of Constable Bates.

When any crime takes place, the police turn first to informers. There is no lack of them. The difficulty is not to extract information, but to sift truth from lies, fact from fancy.

For the first few days the whispers were conflicting. Some were sure the job had been done by one crowd; some were equally sure that it had been done by another.

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But by the third day a curious consistency was coming into the stories. As the faint, blurred image on the radar screen sharpens to a definite recognizable outline; so there appeared, amid a haze of rumor and counterrumor, one hard, definitive fact.

Ronald had done the shooting.

As soon as the first hint reached him, Petrella hurried round to see Ronald's mother. Mrs. Hart, a compact, angry, gray-haired woman, told him that she had seen no sign of Ronald for days. He was too old, and she was too busy, for her to keep an eye on him all the time. She expected he would turn up sooner or later.

"That's not much to go on," said Benjamin. "He could be off on his own somewhere. All the same, warn the stations in this Division to keep an eye open for him."

That was on Thursday. On Friday morning a lighterman reported that his hawser had become fouled by an obstruction off the Camperdown Slipway. He thought it was a car. A heavy recovery vehicle went to the spot and pulled out a four-door German Steyr.

The report came in from the police mechanics late that afternoon and Benjamin spread a map on the table. "They say it's been in the water at least three days. The damage to the bodywork suggests that it went in higher up, and has been rolled over by the current, or dragged along the bottom."

"Then it went in off Shippams Wharf or thereabouts," said Petrella. "There's almost a right angle in the river. The scour would run round the longer side of the curve." He demonstrated with his hand.

"There'll be enough light if we hurry," said Benjamin.

Shippams Wharf and Shippams Reach are a relic of an ambitious Sand and Ballast undertaking which died in the early years of the last war and had never been resurrected. It was an area of derelict godowns, weed-grown standings, and a length of badly maintained riverbank, the shoring of which was bulging, like an old pair of corsets on a remorselessly spreading woman. Weather and the passage of time had almost wiped the name Shippams from the great wooden gates which barred their progress.

"It doesn't look as if anyone's been through here for a considerable time," said Benjamin.

Petrella, who was examining the gates, came back and spread his hands. "Oil," he said. "Thick oil. Someone's lifted the left-hand gate off its hinges. I think this is it."

On the wharf they found further evidence in the form of a deep, fresh scrape. Some heavy body had sliced the rust off one of the bollards.

"Here's where the car went over," agreed Benjamin. He squinted downstream in the dusk. "That's the Camperdown on the other side of the bend, isn't it?"

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"That's right," said Petrella. "The car would go downstream fast so long as it still had a bit of bouyancy. Then it would gradually get silted down."

Benjamin, his hands deep in his raincoat pockets, shivered. The February dusk was bringing up a cold mist with it. Already the lights on the Essex bank were blurring.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I want this place turned inside out."

"What are we looking for?"

"I've no idea," said Benjamin. "But I want it done all the same."

At eleven o'clock next morning the Superintendent's hunch was justified. Thrust away into the back of a derelict water tank they found a gun.

"Take it down to Central as fast as you can drive," said Petrella to Wilmot. "Don't break your neck though. I'd like it to get there safely. They've still got the bullet that killed Bates. They'll be able to tell us if this is the gun."

The report was at Gabriel Street by two o'clock. The gun, said the Ballistics Section, was a .38 American automatic. It was undoubtedly the gun which had fired test bullet (Z 184) already in their possession. The gun had also, as a matter of routine, been subjected to testing by the fingerprint section who had recovered a partial set of right-hand prints, three fingers and a thumb. These had been identified beyond question as Ronald Hart's.

"I never really believed it, somehow," said Petrella to Benjamin. "But there it is—in black and white."

"Get out his description on the teletype," said Benjamin. "See if we can find a photograph for circulation. Full-scale search. And have his mother's house watched."

A full-scale search by the Metropolitan Police involves many thousands of men and women, but this was not a case in which any exertion was going to be grudged. From house to house, from street to street, through divisions and districts the hunt ran on. A steady stream of information poured into Gabriel Street Station, which had become field headquarters for the operation—poured in, was sifted and examined. And in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the reports proved to be unreliable or irrelevant. For forty-eight hours Benjamin and Petrella slept in shifts.

During the late afternoon of the second day, as dusk was falling and Petrella was waiting for his relief the telephone rang . . .

Miss Postance had spent the afternoon in her office, interviewing her probationers; she tried to keep her mind on her exacting job, but more than half her thoughts were elsewhere. She said goodbye to the last of her callers and set for a few minutes before starting on her endless backlog of unwritten reports.

It was at this moment that she

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heard the window of the next door room being shut.

She got up slowly and walked across, trying to persuade herself that she had been mistaken. It was not really a room, but a dim annex to her office, where files were stored and tea was made. Its single small window overlooked the passage leading to the back of the building.

There came no further sound.

"Imagination," said Miss Postance firmly. Nevertheless, she turned the handle and jerked the door open. Standing just inside, an apologetic smile on his face, was the person the whole Metropolitan Police Force was searching for.

"Why, Ronald," she said, "this is a nice surprise. I've been wondering what's happened to you. Why did you come in this way?"

Ronald advanced cautiously into the room. "Do you think we could lock that door?" he said, looking at the door which led into the passage.

"That's all right," said Miss Postance. "No one's going to come in. See, I'll put up the 'Engaged' sign."

She walked across, pleased that she was able to do so quite steadily, and opened the door. At the end of the passage a typewriter clacked from the clerks' room, and she heard the voice of Sergeant Bellew. With a gesture, half angry, half defiant, she reversed the card which said 'Free' on one side and 'Engaged' on the other.

"How can I help?" she said.

Ronald was slouching in her visitor's chair, his hands in his pockets, whistling softly between his broken teeth, exactly as she had seen him a dozen times when he was confessing to some minor misdemeanor, or asking for tolerance, or promising reform.

"You don't think I shot that copper, do you Miss?"

"You ought to know," said Miss Postance. "*Did* you shoot him?"

"That's just it," said Ronald. "That's what I had to come and tell you. I didn't do it. They keep saying I did. They showed me the gun. Made me pick it up. But I never seen it before. Matter of fact"—there was an overtone of naiveté in his voice—"I don't know how to use a gun, really."

Miss Postance said, "Tell me that again, Ronald. About the gun. You say they made you handle it. Is that right? What did you do, exactly. Can you remember?"

"It was Benny's gun. He showed me how to take the clip out and put it back again. Then they kept saying how I'd shot this copper. And the police were looking for me. But they'd look after me."

"Where was all this, Ronald?"

"Collins Rents. Down by the river."

"And who's this Benny you're talking about?"

"I've been there four, five days now. This afternoon, when Arnie was asleep, I got out of the window

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at the back. I didn't know what to do. So I come along to see you."

"You did quite right," said Miss Postance valiantly.

"What do I do now? I don't want to go back. They won't like it, me getting out. Benny warned me not to show myself."

"Of course you mustn't go back. Benny who?"

"I wouldn't want to go to the police. They'll beat me up, wouldn't they? I wouldn't want that."

"They won't touch you—not once they've heard your story. Just you sit tight. No one's going to hurt you."

She pulled the telephone over and asked for Inspector Petrella at Gabriel Street Police Station.

When she heard his voice she said, with a desperate assumption of calmness, "Could you come to my office, by yourself, as quickly as possible?"

"I can't leave here until Benjamin takes over," said Petrella. "He'll be up inside a quarter of an hour."

"It's very urgent. I've got Ronald here. He tells me some friends of his have been looking after him. At a place called Collins Rents. Down by the river."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Ronald moving. "Please," she added, and put the receiver back with a clatter as Ronald jumped up.

But he wasn't looking at her. His eyes were on the door through which he had come.

"Someone getting in, Miss," he said. "It's them. They must've followed me."

For a moment Miss Postance stood undecided. Then she turned and ran for the other door. She heard footsteps behind her, fumbled with the handle, and realized that she was too late . . .

At Gabriel Street, Petrella sat staring at the receiver in his hands. Then he got stiffly to his feet. He had averaged four hours sleep for the past five nights, and his mind was working as unwillingly as his body.

He realized afterward that all he had to do was to ring back the Sergeant-in-Charge at Kennington and ask him to go in and check up on Miss Postance. But this simple solution never occurred to him. His overmastering desire was to get round to Kennington himself.

He ran downstairs and said to Sergeant Morris in the C.I.D. Room, "Look after things here, will you? I shall be out for half an hour. It's urgent."

Then he ran out into the road, leaving Sergeant Morris staring after him.

At the end of the road Petrella found Bernard, dozing in the seat of his taxi.

"Kennington," he said. "The Probation Office behind the new Magistrates Court. See how quick you can get there."

Three and a half minutes later

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Bernard asked, "That quick enough?"

He got no answer. Petrella was already out of the cab and running up the steps.

"Stone a crow," said Bernard. "He *is* in a hurry."

Sergeant Bellew, in the outer office, was about to pack up for the evening when he heard Petrella arrive. He heard him walk up the passage, pause, then come back fast. By this time he too was on his feet.

"What's going on here?" he said. "Sorry, sir. Didn't recognize you. Something wrong?"

"Have you seen Miss Postance?"

"She's in her room."

"Not now," said Petrella.

He led the way back. The room was empty.

"She could've gone out the back way," said Sergeant Bellew, pointing to the door at the end of the passage.

"Where does it lead to?"

"Straight out to the car park. Hullo. What's all that?"

On the floor, behind Miss Postance's desk, there was a dark patch, still damp.

"More blood here," said the Sergeant. "Been an accident of some sort? I didn't hear anything."

Petrella steadied himself with one hand on the desk, and tried to think.

"Do you know a place called Collins Rents?"

"Down by the river?"

"That's right."

"Been condemned. A few people still living there. Go right at the circus, first left, and keep straight on."

Petrella said, "Ring up Superintendent Benjamin. He'll be in my office at Gabriel Street. Tell him that I think Ronald Hart's somewhere in Collins Rents, and I'm going after him now. Will he bring as many men as he can, and come quick."

Sergeant Bellew clearly had a number of questions he would like to have asked, but Petrella cut him short by running out of the room.

Superintendent Benjamin had reached Petrella's office a few minutes after Petrella's departure. He too was short of sleep, and his temper was not improved by the sight of the empty chair and deserted post.

He rang for Sergeant Morris.

"Went out about five minutes ago," said the Sergeant. "Told me to look after things."

"He had absolutely no right—" began Benjamin. "All right, Sergeant. Nothing to do with you, of course. I'll see him as soon as he gets back. What's that you've got there?"

"Special Delivery from Central, sir. I was just signing for it when you came in."

The Memorandum from the C.R.O. was short and to the point.

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"Benjamin (Benny) Sale, six convictions including larceny from shops and warehouses, breaking and entering, and robbery with violence. Shown by our records to have sustained multiple fractures of the jaw in a fight in Pentonville Prison. Six weeks in prison infirmary prior to release. Could explain difficulty in speaking. Recent known associates: Gerald Baker (alias Birket, Benson, Bristow) and Arnold Cutts. All three have carried arms. Present whereabouts unknown."

"That's more like it," said Benjamin. As he reached for it the telephone rang. It was Sergeant Bellew.

He listened in silence as the Sergeant talked, then said, "Anything else?"

"Only one thing, sir. Before I rang you I had a look round. A window has been forced in the room at the back. And there's blood on the floor of this room."

"Which room?"

"Probation Office. Miss Postance's room."

Benjamin was a man who took first things first.

"Give me that address again," he said. "Collins Rents. North side of Bank Street. Thank you."

He rang off and said to Sergeant Morris. "I'm taking a car myself. Wilmot and Dunster can come with me. I want you to get two more full crews—get them from Southwark and the Elephant. Here's the address they're to come to. Stand by here to relay messages. And then get hold of the Chief Superintendent and tell him what's happening."

"Tell him what's *happening?*" said Sergeant Morris sarcastically. But this was to himself. Superintendent Benjamin was clattering down the stairs.

Collins Rents, or what is left of them since the blitz, lie along the north side of Bank Street; behind them there is a long, narrow strip of paved and guttered yard; behind the yard, a line of warehouses, and behind the warehouses, the river.

All this Dunster explained to Benjamin as their car bumped forward into the February dusk.

"It used to be one block. The flats were built for the men who worked in the warehouses—that was years ago, of course. They've been condemned dozens of times. But you can't get rid of the people. They just go on living there. Like rats in a stack. You turn right here, The only way to get rid of them's to pull it down."

Benjamin said, "How many ways in?"

"There's the main front door, with steps up to landings, and I expect you can get into the Court at the back."

"Stop here," said Benjamin. "We'll do the last bit on foot." And to the driver, "Stay here and stop the other cars. Dunster and Wilmot come with me."

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Bank Street was empty. A few lights showed behind misty windows from the houses and shops on the south side of the street. The Rents, an ugly black box of brick, was dark and silent.

"Doesn't look as if anyone's at home," growled Benjamin.

"We wouldn't see them," said Dunster. "The windows on this side are all boarded up. The rooms the people use are at the back. In here."

They turned in, through a doorway from which the door had long since vanished, and climbed the worn steps.

"Do people actually live here?" said Benjamin.

"Smells a bit," said Dunster. "But you ought to come here in summer."

They climbed another flight of steps and found a landing with two doors giving onto it.

"There's a light in here," said Wilmot. He dropped onto one knee and squinted through the letter box of the left-hand door. Then he tried it gently.

"Locked or bolted."

"Light's gone out," said Wilmot. And a moment later, "Someone coming."

Benjamin banged on the door.

"Who's that?" said a gruff voice from inside.

"Police. Open up!" said Benjamin.

The answer was two shots fired through the letter box. The first went through Benjamin's coat. The second hit the wall and ricocheted. Wilmot gave a startled squeal as something red-hot touched his left ear.

In that confined space the noise prevented hearing. But no orders were needed. A few seconds later they were on the lower landing.

"They can't rush us here," said Benjamin. "They've got to come down the stairs, and guns or no guns, it's not going to be easy for them to do that. Dunster, get back to the car and bring up the other crews. The first men up are to get round the back and block it."

"Something like, isn't it?" said Wilmot.

"Keep your head down," said Benjamin.

Petrella and Bernard had reached Collins Rents about ten minutes ahead of the official force. They had made no attempt on the front of the building, but gone straight round to the back.

"A car there," said Bernard. "And the radiator's warm. That's the one they came in, all right."

"Can we get in the back way?"

"You might. If you had wings."

Two stories up a chink of light was showing.

"Could we get in from the warehouse? There's some sort of archway across. It oughtn't to be too difficult, if you could get on top of it."

"Rather you than me," said Bernard.

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There was, as Petrella had seen, a tall overhead archway, joining the warehouse and the building at second-story level.

"Tell you what," said Bernard. "If we can get the brake off this bus and push it back a bit—" they suited the action to the words—"then we hop up on top of it, reach that window, bust the glass, and get in."

"Brilliant," said Petrella. Three minutes later they were in the warehouse. A short climb took them up to the second story. "All we need now," said Bernard, "is a ruddy great long ladder."

"See if we can get at it from above," said Petrella.

They climbed another flight.

"Easy," said Bernard. "Out of this window—crawl along that bit of brickwork—reach up—go in the window the other side. You, I mean, not me."

Petrella had one leg over the sill when Bernard stopped him.

"You thought what you're going to do when you get inside?"

"I'll worry about that when I get there."

"As I imagined," said Bernard. "No forethought. What you must have on a job like this is bags of forethought. Just wait here—I won't be long."

Two minutes later he was back and something gleamed in his hand.

"What on earth is it?" said Petrella.

"Fire extinguisher, off my bus—just the thing for close quarters. Put it down the front of your jacket."

The brick archway, which seemed to have been put in as a strengthening piece between the two buildings, had been slated to keep out the weather. Once he was astride it, Petrella found it quite easy to make his way forward. It was the final step which was going to be tricky.

He had to stand up on the slanting ridgeway and balance himself with the palms of his hands flat against the brickwork, until he could grasp the window sill. Then, somehow, he had to open the window. It was not made easier by the fact that most of the slates on which he had to stand were loose, and wet with the mist which was now coming up quite thickly from the river.

Petrella looked over his shoulder, and almost laughed at the comic white blur of Bernard's face.

"Here goes," he said. He stood up.

At this moment the bottom half of the window, which was within a few inches of his nose, started to move.

Bernard croaked a warning. Petrella grabbed the sill and his foot slipped. The window rose a few inches, a strong arm came out, and a hand grabbed him . . .

On the first-floor landing of the

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main staircase a conference was taking place.

"If you would give the necessary authority," said Inspector Driver, "I could get an issue of small arms up here in less than ten minutes."

"Certainly not," said Benjamin. "Start shooting back and God knows what will happen." He wandered across and took another look at the crowd, now parked three deep along the opposite pavement. "Besides, I'm not at all sure yet that they mean business. We've only had those two shots. That could have been someone holding a gun in his hand who panicked."

"If he was holding a loaded gun, I'd say he meant business," said Driver.

"Well, I'm not going to start any fireworks," said Benjamin. If a bystander stopped a bullet, Benjamin would be held responsible. "This isn't a job for an Army Corps. You get out and use your men to keep the crowd back. Wilmot, have you got what I asked for?"

"Two fourteen-pound sledge hammers," said Wilmot. "Found them in the shipyard."

"All right. Take them up to the next landing. You and Dunster can use one each. Stand clear of the door, on either side, and don't start hitting until we've got the hose coupled up."

"What are you planning to do" asked Driver.

"When we've got the door down we'll go straight in on hands and knees, covered by the powerhose. Get a few more of your men into the Court at the back, in case they try to break that way. And don't be all night about it."

Sergeant Dunster, his back flat against the passage wall, flexed his muscles, then swung the heavy shipwright's beetle once or twice to get the feel of it. He looked at Benjamin, who nodded.

The hammer smacked into the woodwork of the door.

In the succeeding moment of silence a man's voice said, quite close to them, "Lay off that, if you don't want the girl to get hurt."

Benjamin said, "You're bluffing. You haven't got a girl there."

"Want us to twist her arm off and throw it out to you?"

"If you've got a girl there she'll have to take her chances along with the rest of you. Better come out quietly, Benny."

"She's not our girl, she's yours," said Benny Sale. "Like to hear her squeal? Fetch her down, Arnie."

"I don't know what he's playing at," whispered Benjamin. "Better hold it until we see who he has got in there."

In fact, the arrival of Arnie saved Petrella a lot of trouble. The door of the room had been bolted, top and bottom, on the passage side, and was proving a tough obstacle. Arnie was whistling as he came along the passage. It was clear that they were all in for a packet of trouble, but the thought of man-

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handling a girl was one which appealed to him. He drew the bolts, and went in.

Petrella, who was taking no chances, hit him with a brick from the fireplace.

"Is he dead?" said Miss Postance, whose strong arm had helped Petrella into the room.

"I don't think so," said Petrella. "He's got a very hard head. Tie him up with his braces. Are you in on this, Ronald?"

"Sure, I'll help you, Mister Petrella," said Ronald. "Give me a gun and we'll go down and shoot them all up."

"I'm afraid I haven't got a gun. You can have the brick."

"Do be careful," said Miss Postance.

"Don't worry," said Petrella. "When you've finished tying him up, *stay here*. And if there's any shooting, *lie down*."

He got out Bernard's fire extinguisher, an old-fashioned, chromium-plated hand model, and started along the passage and down the stairs. There were voices below, but an angle in the passage hid the front door.

Petrella peered round. There were two men. They both held guns in their hands, and both had their backs to him.

A sudden crash shook the building. Benjamin had decided to call off the truce.

The door shuddered.

"Where's Arnie?" said Benny.

The other man said, "Scarpered, I wouldn't be surprised." He turned his head and saw Petrella.

"I should give up if I were you," said Petrella quietly.

As if his words had been a starter's signal, a number of things began to happen in violent succession.

Benny swung around and fired blindly up the passage. Petrella pushed down the handle of the fire extinguisher and a stream of white foam shot out and enveloped Benny. Ronald threw his brick. The door collapsed inward and through it came a solid, hissing steel pillar of water. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that Miss Postance, contrary to orders, should have come downstairs and chosen this moment to round the corner.

When Petrella reached her and scooped her up, she was not only soaked, she was, for the moment, speechless.

"It's all right," she said at last. "I can manage by myself now."

Petrella observed, with only half his attention, the rapid conclusion of the fight in the front hall. Ronald was sitting on the second man, hammering his head on the floor. Benny seemed chiefly concerned with wiping the foam out of his eyes.

Petrella looked down at the dripping, half-undressed girl in his arms and realized, for the first time, that he didn't even know her first name.

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a new story by

HAROLD R. DANIELS

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	HAROLD R. DANIELS
TITLE:	*Point of View*
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Hobson's background did not prepare him for his meeting with Marian Scott. The effect on the publisher was so explosive it led inevitably to Hobson's choice . . .*

A WOMAN ONCE GOT PAST FRANK Hobson's secretary and into his office to demand that he do something about her husband who was, she said, running around with a girl who worked in the mailing room. The husband, she wailed, was spending money that was needed at home—squandering it on this little chit. She appealed to Hobson to help protect her home.

The husband was Joe Mason who was then an editor on Hobson's magazine, *Point of View*. Mason was an able editor. The girl from the mailing room was a rather mousy little girl with poor eyesight and virtually no figure at all. The wife—Mason's—was a strident, completely insensitive virago who needed protection as much as any tiger. As a matter of fact, Joe Mason had once, out of pity for the girl and an immense distaste for going home to his wife, bought the girl a supper. And that was all.

Frank Hobson investigated deeply enough to learn that a supper had been bought. He then fired both the girl and Joe Mason. The girl simply went home. Mason could have had a job on any magazine in the field. He didn't take one. Instead, he got deliberately drunk and went home intending to beat his wife into insensibility. He didn't, it turned out, have the nerve or the courage to do this—he didn't know which. He didn't care to find out, so he stayed drunk.

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The point is not that Hobson was a highly moral man. He fired Mason because he could not understand why a man would be unfaithful to his wife, even to the extent of buying a dinner for another woman. He was convinced, of course, that Mason's infidelity had gone much deeper, but since he could not understand Mason, he felt it best to get rid of him. A month or so later Hobson went to a cocktail party arranged by the art director of *Point of View* and met Marian Scott.

The art director was very arty. This concealed a notable lack of talent. Fortunately for him, he had a clever young assistant who was not arty at all, but who did put out a presentable magazine. The art director was not avant-garde. He still thought it fashionable to have his guests sit on the floor or on hassocks. Marion Scott was one of those who sat on the floor.

She was then about twenty-four, with very dark hair that she wore in a variation of page boy. Indeed, her hair was so dark that it reflected no light at all. Her eyes were wide-set and of a shade between blue and gray. Her best feature was her mouth: the upper lip was full and curving, the lower lip rather short. At the corners of her mouth were two small creases. These ran perpendicular to her lips and had a tendency to deepen perceptibly when she smiled, giving an enchanting sweetness to her expression.

The art director took Hobson to meet her and she stood up gracefully. Standing, she was quite tall, so that her figure appeared somewhat more slender than it was. Her legs were handsome. She smiled and Hobson was fascinated.

As the publisher of a successful magazine, Hobson had seen a pretty woman or two, some of them prettier, doubtless, than Marian, although he would not have believed this at that time. She had an enormous impact on him. This impact was distorted out of all proportion in the light of Hobson's own background.

Almost every man, in his youth, has had this experience. At some time, usually at about fourteen, he has seen in another classroom or in another neighborhood, some radiant girl, all pink and gold, and secretly given her his adoration. He goes early to bed so that he can hug his pillow and pretend that he is embracing her for the first and last time. He creates scenes in which he is nobly dying, having laid down his life for her. She weeps, realizing too late how truly noble he is. Very few men have not acted out this drama, although few will ever admit it for fear of ridicule. But it is not really ludicrous. To the youth it is the first conscious recognition of beauty. He cherishes it so fiercely that he seldom tries to make any contact with the girl. He wants nothing to spoil his fantasy. Note that he tries to

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keep its perfection by always dying in his self-drama. The point is that when the youth becomes a man, he remembers that pretty girl just as she was and will avoid meeting her as a grown woman.

Frank Hobson, a driver and a main-chancer even as a boy, had never had that first impassioned recognition of beauty. He had never had time to play-act an idyll. When Marian Scott stood up, the effect on Hobson was shattering.

Many beautiful women are something less than intellectually brilliant if for no other reason than that their beauty insulates them from any need to develop mental agility. Marian Scott, however, was articulate and intelligent. This became clear to Hobson in the few minutes of conversation that they shared over cigarettes while waiting for drinks at the bar. He saw it objectively. He would have excused her for being doltish or stupid, but he was immensely pleased that this was not necessary.

She was genuinely interested in him and again this was a matter of background. She was newly finished with a marriage to a young artist. The artist had had no talent. Unfortunately, he discovered this lack in himself after the marriage. Frustrated, he used Marian as an outlet for his impotent rages. By criticizing her every word and act he established in his own mind his superiority over her. This was better than being superior to no one at all. Further, he was a liar and a cheat. She was well rid of him and knew it.

Reacting from two years of constant accusations that she was a sloppy housekeeper, a poor cook, an indifferent lover, and a person of no sensitivity, Marian was receptive to Hobson's obvious admiration. He was a mature person. After two years with the young artist she saw maturity as an asset. Marian Scott was exactly ready for her meeting with Frank Hobson. Where he was a prig, she saw a high morality; where he was a stuffed shirt, she saw only dignity.

It can be said for Hobson that he was reasonably well informed. He was widely read and intelligent. In physical appearance he was not unattractive. If he had not spent all his life trying to amount to something, he might have amounted to something. And he did love Marian Scott from the moment he met her. It is not too surprising that she came to love him, or to believe that she loved him.

From the start they shared things. She said, "It's a very nice party, isn't it?" Her smile, when she said it, was shaded to mean "It's a stupid party and isn't Tommy (the art director) a horse's neck?" Frank heard the words and read the smile. He answered, "A real ball." Later it became a private game with them to devastate by exaggeration. They even thought that they had invented the trick.

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In half an hour Frank and Marian agreed to leave the party and to meet in a small bar that they both knew. She left first, on a pretext. Frank joined her in the bar as soon as he could escape from Tommy.

She had a small apartment in a thick-walled old building that had once been a mansion. Frank took her there that evening and left her without so much as a good-night kiss. Innocent enough on the surface—but had they known it, the stuff of which murder is made . .

Frank's wife, Grace, was reading in bed when he got home. She was a placid woman and he had thought for years that he loved her. He lit her cigarette for her before he got ready for his shower. Not pretty, but not ugly either. A big woman with a handsome figure.

He remembered a young Frank Hobson, too busy for fun, working and scrambling and throat-cutting in her father's publishing house. Six magazines, four of them with over three million circulation. And driving, fighting, getting a step nearer the good top jobs over the bodies of friends and enemies alike. That's the way it was in publishing and if you didn't like it you got out. And being recognized as a talent, after a while, Frank made more and more money—but the knives got sharper. And, finally, he met the boss's daughter.

This he knew—he would have been given his own magazine some day anyway. Marrying Grace had just made it come that much faster. And he had really thought he loved her until tonight. He knew now that he had merely been pleased with her.

Grace asked, "Was it pretty awful, Frank?" (She knew Tommy.)

She had always been understanding, Frank remembered. He felt sorry for her. A wonderful person—but unable to give him what Marian gave him simply by letting him look at her and listen to her. Out of pity Frank was tender with Grace that night.

The next morning he called Marian and arranged to meet her for lunch. She had known he would call. They had both known it although it had not been discussed. They admitted this over lunch. They also spoke of Frank's wife. Never, then or afterward, did Frank say an unkind thing about Grace. The contrary, rather. They both accepted tacitly the premise that they would be meeting hereafter and that they would have to be discreet.

If it seems that Marian Scott was foolish—stupid, perhaps—for accepting these terms, it should be remembered that she had been hurt and Frank Hobson was a rock. And Frank, warmed by first love, was exerting charm that he would not have been capable of even the day before. At that, it was a month before he stayed late at her apartment and they became lovers in the accepted sense of the word. After

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that the affair followed classical lines.

From the start Hobson could not bear to be separated from her. He had a private line installed in his office and he called her almost hourly. Even so, they always found something to talk about. But if she didn't answer the phone he became wildly jealous and demanded explanations when he talked with her again. This pleased her rather than otherwise. It was assurance that she was wanted and needed and loved.

They might have gone on indefinitely in this fashion if it had not been for a combination of circumstances. Circumstance One: they had dinner in a quietly expensive restaurant one evening. Halfway through the meal the headwaiter seated a party of women at an adjoining table. Two of the women were friends of Grace.

It was inevitable that something like this would happen—Hobson knew this, yet he was badly frightened when it actually took place. This he knew of Grace—she would not put up with infidelity for an instant. If she suspected it, she would immediately ask her lawyer to arrange for a quiet divorce and there would be no more magazine for him. Her father and brothers were among the most powerful men in the publishing business. They had put him in command of *Point of View;* they could as quickly relieve him of that command. Relieved publishers and editors were like unfrocked ministers or disbarred attorneys. Shamed men. Pariahs. The best they could hope for was to drift into some obscure corner as copy readers.

Grace's friends did not recognize Hobson, but he was not relieved. Next time they might—or someone that he didn't even see might mention to Grace that Frank had been seen with a pretty girl. Grace would remember all the evenings that he had lately been away from home, supposedly on magazine affairs, and that would tear it. The best indication of the depth of Frank Hobson's feeling for Marian Scott lies in the fact that he did not consider giving her up, not for a minute. He couldn't.

One solution for them would have been to see each other only in her apartment, although even this involved some risk. Anyone who cared to find out all about their affair could do so quite simply—merely by following him to the apartment and talking to the janitor or the superintendent or the woman who did Marian's cleaning. And besides, they could not stay cooped up like caged birds. He had come to find a new delight in the theater, in concerts, even in dining out, because of the fillip she gave to these things. And he got a sense of youth and power out of being seen with her.

Circumstance Two: he saw her, one afternoon, with a man. Hobson was entertaining one of the maga-

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zine's important contributors at lunch. The writer was a Solomon of a writer who could not be dined by a common editor. The lunch became a torment as Frank watched her laugh and talk with the man, just as she laughed and talked with him. *Just as she did with him.*

He could scarcely bear it. He wanted to rush to her table and demand to know who the man was, how many times she had seen him, what he meant to her. Instead, he had to listen to the Solomon's pontifical prediction of an imminent political catastrophe (which failed to come about). Hobson had been jealous of Marian before but never to this sickening depth.

It developed—Hobson had it checked—that the man was her sister's husband, in town on a buying trip from a Midwestern city.

Frank and Marian worried over Circumstance One. They quarreled over Circumstance Two. Then they clung to each other and wished for a world in which they could be together without danger.

On the evening of Circumstance Two he left Marian early and drove into the country to think things out. His conclusions were basic. He was fond of Grace. He did not want to hurt her. He didn't want to give up the social position and business success that marriage to Grace had brought him. He didn't want to give up *Point of View*. These things being the case, divorce was out of the question.

Alternately, he could not give up Marian Scott. He was still raw-nerved at the thought of seeing her with another man. Suppose, next time, it was not a relative. Suppose it was a man younger and handsomer than himself? She would not go on forever being satisfied with that part of himself that he could steal from Grace.

He lit a cigarette while his mind dodged the true solution to his intolerable position. Murder. He tested the solution obliquely. Then, instead of murder . . . death. Would death, sudden and final, eliminate his problems? He decided that it would.

Murder knocked on the door of his mind again, less politely. This time he let it in.

Most people have considered murder at least once in their lives. Tentatively, speculatively. Frank Hobson had done this himself when his drive, magazinewise, had been stalled briefly by someone more ruthless than himself. Like the others who have considered it, he had always thought that it would be quite simple to carry out a murder and go unpunished—until he actually gave the matter serious consideration.

A high-powered rifle from a faraway vantage point? No good. Where would you buy a high-powered rifle without leaving a trail? Run the victim down with a car? The police would call it hit-and-run, perhaps, but they were sure to

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tip off every body shop, every garage, to watch for a car with dents up front. No, it was not that simple.

Hobson snubbed out his cigarette and drove home. As he lay in bed listening to Grace's soft even breathing, he wondered what Marian was doing at that precise moment. Was she sleeping? Reading? What was to prevent her seeing another man after he left? A warm girl, capable of passion. The same sick jealousy overwhelmed him again so that he was tempted to go down to the library and use the extension phone to call her. The fact that he even entertained so dangerous a notion appalled him.

Murder insinuated itself into his very bedroom. It sat on the foot of his bed and leered down at him . . .

He was a thorough man and a capable man and he planned for murder with all the drive he would have used in setting up a new department in *Point of View*. In three days he had decided on Method and was at work on Detail. In five days he was ready for Action.

Hobson's selection of Method was made after careful consideration of many possibilities and in the strong light of one essential. The murder must appear to be an accident. Further, it must appear to be one of those tragic incidents that arouse sympathy, never suspicion. The type that is reported, "Young Housewife Dies in Tragic Attempt to Save Child from Drowning," or "Faulty Stove Takes Life of Brighton Woman," or "Brown Street Woman Dies in Fall." The examples were real-life accidents that Hobson took the trouble to look into. In each case there had been an investigation by the Medical Examiner, this being the law. In each case the investigation had been perfunctory and carried out in such a manner as to spare the feelings of the survivors. Hobson, as a matter of fact, could see how, in the last two cases, murder might very well have been got away with.

Hobson's method was neither by fall nor by drowning. It was based on the recurrence of one particular kind of accidental death, reported with fatal frequency in a decade's file of newspapers. He selected this method because of the very frequency and because it would be as nearly as possible painless to the victim.

He didn't take any of this for granted. He checked on it by having lunch with the magazine's star crime writer and pumping him judiciously. The star writer told him that no, there would be very little pain connected with such a death. A few seconds of struggle preceded merciful unconsciousness. Hobson, having accepted himself as a murderer, could not see himself inflicting any considerable amount of pain on a stranger, let alone one who had been dear to him.

The matter Detail took only a lit-

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tle time. He shopped at a large department store, paying cash for his purchase, and taking the article away with him. The purchase was not to be used in the actual execution of crime. He merely took it to an isolated spot and experimented with it. He did this primarily to see if his plan was feasible, and secondarily, to establish the length of time it would take. The one additional item he needed, he took from his own closet.

The final step—Action—consisted of following her into the bedroom after an evening in which he had been more than usually kind and considerate—he had already decided that this night it must happen. The evening had been spent, at his suggestion, listening to recordings. She wore a negligee and a comfortable robe, as she often did when they were alone together.

He took the plastic bag that he had borrowed from his own closet and quickly slipped it over her head with one hand, drawing it in at the neck while he pinioned her arms with his free hand. At first she thought he was joking—in poor taste, but joking. By the time she decided that it was not a joke she had already exhausted the oxygen in the bag.

She flailed with her arms and tried to pull away. For a panicky moment Hobson almost let her, but while he tried to think of some explanation he could offer for nearly killing her, she slumped loosely in his arms—just as the crime writer had predicted. If he could have seen her face at that moment he might not have gone through with his plan; but the plastic bag, sucked in with her efforts to breathe, had flattened around her features as if in a lover's caress.

He felt for a heartbeat. It was there, faint and irregular, but there. He pulled the bag away from her throat for a second, just enough to let a little air in. Not enough to live on but enough to encourage the lungs in their effort. No, the crime writer had said, a victim would not recover consciousness under such circumstances.

He lit a cigarette. Her brand. When it was glowing, he dropped it on her pillow. His experiment with the department store purchase —a similar pillow—had shown that it would take nearly ten minutes before the interior of the pillow became a glowing mass, almost impossible to extinguish.

While he waited, he put her on the bed, next to the pillow. She stirred and he twisted the neck of the plastic bag until the stirring stopped. She was still breathing faintly when he took the bag away and held her head next to the smoldering pillow. By this time he was having a hard time with his own breathing, and his eyes smarted.

When he was sure there was enough smoke in her lungs for the Medical Examiner to find easily,

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he closed the plastic bag again over her head and held it tight at the neck—until there was no heartbeat, no stirring, no anything. Then he took the bag off and put it in his pocket.

The tears in Hobson's eyes were not solely due to the smoke when he left the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. He was sweating from his efforts and his emotions. Behind him the pillow would smolder. The bedding would ignite. It might take hours before the sullen char blossomed into flame. But tomorrow there would be another of those deadly repetitious headlines. "Fire Takes Life of Woman." And the subhead: "Was Smoking in Bed, Fire Marshal Says."

No, the tears were partly for something that had been shared, something that had been beautiful, something that had been tender and passionate. And something that he couldn't afford, things being what they were . . . He wiped the tears away as he hurried down the stairs on his way home to Grace.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **A. H. Z. CARR**

TITLE: ***The Crucial Twist***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: In the Catskills, New York

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *So often one small, incalculable thing happens in a crisis which twists the event out of its obvious shape . . .*

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE taking of human life that curiously commands respect even while it horrifies. Which of us, the passive and blandly conventional majority, meeting from year to year no adventure more startling than an argument with a traffic policeman, can help but feel a certain awe in the presence of those who have dared to commit the final act of self-assertion?

Sometimes when I look at my wife's good-humored and gentle features, I experience a wave of what I can only call envy. I will never struggle out of the web of civilized fear and compunction that holds me, long enough to kill even one man, though I hated him; whereas she, quite deliberately and consciously, once killed three.

More than a touch of irony lies in the fact that she has always strongly disapproved of what she learned in college to call the traditional barbarisms of our society—hunting, capital punishment, and so on. When she and I first came to the upper Catskills to live, I was irked by the sentimental militance with which she defended the wild life that abounds on our mountain side. The butcher shop in the village, four miles away, deprived me of any excuse for indulging the sadist in me—that was her view. Even woodchucks were sacrosanct.

The result was that a certain amount of discussion took place

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before the vigorous "No Hunting" posts went up on our fifty wooded acres. Whenever it became my duty during the deer or pheasant season to point out the signs to some studiously unobservant fellow with a gun and a dog, I felt like a hypocrite, and was.

What irritated me most, I think, was the fact that my wife is a better shot than I. On an improvised rifle range in our orchard she took pleasure in mortifying me by Amazonian displays of off-hand shooting. She was content, however, with the academic exercise of this natural talent; until, as I have said, she killed three men.

Now that the unpleasant notoriety has worn away, I can write about the affair, I think, quite dispassionately. This is how it was.

We were sitting on our lawn, on a warm October morning, my wife sketching her cat and I at work, when a small, commonplace sedan rattled up the mountain and turned down our lane. Living as we do, at the top of a dead-end road, with our nearest neighbor half a mile away, we are always interested in chance comers.

I rose to greet the man who was the only occupant of the car, and Serious, our Irish setter, went up to sniff at him. He was large; loose brown clothes, good clothes, somewhat lessened the effect of stoutness; and he had a florid, clean-shaven face. At the time, I thought it a pleasant face, with keen blue eyes, a solid nose, and a strong mouth and chin. But I was never very good at physiognomy.

As he took off his soft hat I observed that the thick brush of his sandy hair was shot with gray. With a friendly hand on Serious' neck he smiled and said, "Forgive this intrusion." His voice was cultivated and somewhat high-pitched; and there was a trace of foreign accent in his enunciation.

He introduced himself as Charles Hecklin and handed me a card which bore under his name that of a famous museum of art. Then he said, "I read in a magazine several months ago of your collection of early American furniture, I think?"

We admitted it. The year before, my wife had inherited from her grandmother a number of really magnificent pieces, which had transformed our Grand Rapids household into a decorator's joy. The editor of *Beauty in the Home* who summers nearby had asked permission to send a man to take photographs; and we had the satisfaction of seeing our possessions glorified on his glossy pages.

"The account struck my imagination," said Hecklin. "That is my specialty, you see. I am curator of interiors for—" He named the museum. "It happens that I am taking a little holiday—a ramble through these mountains. I thought to myself that while I am in this neighborhood, I might perhaps prevail on you to let me see your

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Phyfe pieces. At the museum we are now so interested in Phyfe."

My wife and I looked at each other and smiled with our eyes. I had always felt it incongruous that so much impressiveness in the home should be associated with so little in the bank, and my wife, too, thought it advisable to part with some of her too numerous heirlooms. We had hesitated, however, to call in a dealer, fearful that we might be cheated. Mr. Hecklin's visit seemed providential; museums are so respectable.

Enthusiastically, then, we led the way to the house, where Mr. Hecklin displayed an obviously expert knowledge that quickly won our respect. Over our Phyfe sofa and a lowboy by Gillingham he became really eloquent.

"I shall be frank with you," he said at last, when we had been through all the rooms. "I should like to recommend those two pieces to the museum. Would you be interested, perhaps, to set a price?"

We were equally frank. We had never satisfied ourselves, we admitted, as to the real value of the pieces; but we were willing to part with them once we were assured of fair treatment.

"Well, there is another way," he said. "Suppose I talk next week to my colleagues at the museum and we will see how much our budget will stand. We will make you an offer. You can then bring in any expert you wish to advise you."

This struck us as highly satisfactory. We liked Mr. Hecklin quite a bit; there is no one for whom it is so easy to feel friendship as the man who wishes to buy something you wish to sell.

My wife asked him to stay to lunch, and he accepted. Over the luncheon table he showed an intelligent curiosity about life in the country. He himself, he said, was a city dweller by instinct. He needed people around him. He asked us about the feelings of isolation; about the servant problem; about dogs and cats, and animals in general; about whether we did not find the winters intolerably cold; and of all these things we talked casually, while Helen Murdock, who lives a mile or so away, and drives up daily to help my wife in the house, brought us food.

Once Mr. Hecklin revealed a curious gap in his culture, but at the time I did not grasp its implications. My wife is very proud of her little collection of modern paintings, which include a Dufy, a Utrillo, and a John Marin—all accumulated over the years of our marriage by sacrifices in personal adornment such as few women, I believe, would have made. Having gathered from the conversation that she is an artist, Mr. Hecklin looked at the paintings and said to her, "Your work?"

Startled, she said, "Why, no. I wish they were," and stared at him.

He sensed the enormity of his er-

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ror, and laughed. "Ah, well," he said. "I know nothing of modern painting, dear lady. I have a single-track mind—I can appreciate only furniture—and then nothing that is not a century old."

With much cordiality on both sides, he renewed his promise to let us hear from him, and drove away. As I acknowledged his wave I said, "That's a lucky break."

My wife nodded, a little thoughtfully. Since then she has claimed that she already had a dim intuition of the truth; and although I am normally skeptical of post-dated feminine intuitions, I am inclined to believe her.

"Still," she said, "you'd think he would recognize one style of painting from another. That was *so* absurd. Imagine thinking a Dufy and a Marin could be by the same person."

"Oh, well," I said vaguely. "Some people are absolutely blind when it comes to painting." And we let it go at that.

Aside from the pleasurable anticipation of a letter that would begin, "The museum feels, in view of the fine quality of the two pieces in question, that it can offer $5000"—aside from this happy daydream, we thought little of Mr. Hecklin during the week that followed. But I recall speaking of him on the very evening of his reappearance.

We were entertaining some friends, the Penhallows, and I asked George Penhallow, who as a leading etcher often deals with museums, whether he knew Hecklin. He said no, he didn't think so.

The Penhallows left before midnight; Helen Murdock, who had served us dinner, had driven away hours earlier. My wife and I talked aimlessly for a while; then she began to empty ashtrays, while I stood at the window admiring the night.

A large moon had risen over the mountain side, and our orchard, as always in moonlight, had begun to look like a fantastic stage—set in silver and black—something for a harlequinade. All at once, quite without warning, Mr. Hecklin walked in through the open doorway. I suppose he had been waiting around the corner of the house.

I said, "Good God," and my wife gasped.

He carried a short black automatic pistol in his hand, and he was smiling, but with his lips only. My first thought was an irritable realization that his eyes and mouth were hard. Why had I ever thought them otherwise?

Looking at my wife he said, "Do not be alarmed, dear lady. I shall not harm you or your husband—not if you do exactly as I tell you. Sit down—in those chairs." He pointed to two straight-backed chairs.

We sat down, staring at each other. There seemed absolutely nothing to say. But feeling that my wife expected some display of man-

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hood from me, I moistened my lips, and muttered, "What's the idea?"

He turned on me with a scowl, "I told you to be quiet. If you speak you will get hurt."

I was regaining a little self-possession. I said, "What on earth makes you think we're worth robbing?" I still had not caught his intention.

He said, "I shall not warn you again. Be quiet."

My wife whispered, "Do as he says, dear." But that was not enough for me. I was beginning to feel rather pleased with my nonchalance.

I said to Hecklin, "Aren't you being foolish? Tom Murdock, our hired man, lives at the bottom of this road, and he's coming up here tonight." I was lying, of course.

Hecklin showed his teeth in a malignant grimace, and walked over to me, one hand holding the gun, the other in his pocket. I started to rise, but he said, "Sit down," in a voice that made me change my mind. Then he slapped me heavily in the face, twice.

The blows hurt my pride more than my flesh. The sense of my own cowardice was horrible. I just sat there. He said, "That is to teach you both to be quiet. Say nothing, sit still, and you will not be hurt. Otherwise—"

My wife started to speak, but he turned on her with so menacing a movement that I muttered, "Don't," and grabbed her hand. She stopped short and Hecklin moved over to the open window, where he threw an occasional impatient glance at the road.

Presently I could hear the quiet, deep throbbing of a motor coming up the mountain. Almost at the same moment Serious began whining at the kitchen door. That was unlike him; he always barked when a car drove up at night.

My wife turned pale and said, unevenly, "What did you do to the dog?" Hecklin did not answer. Footsteps ran toward the house across the lawn and a man came in through the door. He was short and burly, and he wore a colored handkerchief over the lower half of his face—something I had never seen outside of a Hollywood "Western." He carried a small handtruck such as moving men use; this he deposited in our hallway. Only then did I guess what was to happen.

"The telephone," said Mr. Hecklin and pointed to it. The short man stepped into the hallway and slashed the wires with a knife.

From where I sat I could see the silhouette of a small, covered truck motionless in the road. It had been turned around to face the way it had come. The humiliation of sitting there in silence became intolerable. in what I tried to make a calm, reasonable voice, I said, "Look here, Hecklin, you don't think you can get away with this, do you?"

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He threw me a glance and said, "Joe."

The short man looked at him.

"He talks too much," said Mr. Hecklin.

I could see Joe's eyes narrow over his handkerchief. As he came toward me I stood up, with a vague notion of defending myself. I thought he was going to hit me; instead he kicked me heavily on the shin, and shoved me back into my chair.

The pain was immediate and awful. I groaned and cursed together; and my wife cried, "Let him alone!"

"I told you," said Mr. Hecklin simply. "Be quiet."

My wife's hand in mine was as cold as death. Through a blur of pain and frustrated anger I watched another man come into the house. Although he too was masked, I got the impression that he was young. He was taller than Joe.

He said to Hecklin, in a playful voice, "Okeydoke." Later his meaning became clear, when I found that the tires of our car had been deeply gashed as it stood in the garage.

Hecklin looked at Joe, and said, "Get those guns."

Joe stepped over to the rack where our three rifles and shotguns stood, and took them down.

"Put them in the truck," Hecklin said, and turning to me: "Any more?"

I shook my head. It occurred to me that in the chest that stood near the hall there was a .22 repeater, together with a number of other mementos of my wife's young brother, who had died not long before. But although I had no thought or hope of getting the gun, to tell Hecklin about it would only have added to my feeling of miserable impotence; and I knew that to see the chest tampered with would hurt my wife.

"A pistol?" Hecklin went on, threateningly. "You had better tell me. If we find it you will be sorry."

"There is no pistol, really," my wife said earnestly.

He looked at her, his lips pursed. Then he said, "Tie them up."

The tall young fellow took some heavy cord out of his pocket and deftly tied my wrists and biceps to the back of the chair, my ankles to the legs. He drew the cord tight, so that it cut into my flesh.

I said, "You don't have to tie my wife. She won't bother you."

After an impassive second or two, Hecklin nodded. "All right. Let her alone if she keeps quiet." To Joe, who had come back, he said, "Watch her." Then he went upstairs with the young chap.

I could hear them moving around from room to room. Joe stood at the window, pistol in hand, and picked his teeth under his handkerchief. He saw me watching him and became self-conscious. Removing his finger

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from his mouth, he said, "You want another like you got?"

He took a step toward me, but Hecklin's voice called from above, "If he gets funny slap on a plaster." Joe grinned and took a heavy roll of adhesive tape from his pocket.

My wife said, "Oh, don't."

With a kind of theatrical deliberation he cut off a substantial piece of the tape, and stepping up to me pressed it across my mouth and around the back of my neck. It was not a sensation I should care to have again.

A moment later Hecklin reappeared. Joe, who evidently had been well trained, went upstairs without being told. Furniture moved overhead. Then Joe and the taller man shuffled ponderously down the stairs, grunting under the weight of a massive Georgian highboy—one of our choicer pieces. They had not bothered to remove the contents.

Carrying it to the door, they put it on a hand-truck. We could hear the rollers grind on the stone flagging leading to the road across the lawn. A minute later they were back again; and as they went upstairs Hecklin said harshly, "No carelessness. Understand?" They did not reply.

It is futile to itemize the comings and goings of the next hour. Enough to say that while we sat there in silence, the house was systematically gutted under our eyes. But let it stand as a tribute to Hecklins professional judgment that not one good piece was missed, nor one cheap piece, remnants of our former furnishings, taken.

I have a strong materialistic streak, and almost at once I thought about the insurance. I tried desperately to remember whether the premiums on our burglary policy had been paid and how much if anything, we might hope to collect.

Then I thought about the police. If after Hecklin left, I drove to the nearest telephone—I did not know then about the car tires—the State Troopers would send out an alarm . . . Presently I recalled having read, months before, of a theft of a valuable collection of antiques near Boston. I began to fear that the tracing of stolen furniture in the dealer market must be a difficult job, and that unless Hecklin were caught red-handed there would be little to hope for from the police.

This was the burden of my thoughts at such times when I was not merely watching, with the passive, uncomfortable curiosity of a spectator at a street accident, the relentless movement of our belongings out of our world. I have asked my wife what passed through her mind in that hour. She says she does not remember very clearly. But she wondered whether Serious really had been poisoned; he had been, we found later. She thought, too, as I had, of the rifle, and had a brief fantasy in which she some-

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how seized it and held them all at bay while she released me and went for help.

These thoughts she has recalled; but I think she may have had another which she has preferred to forget. I know that toward the end it came to me, with a sinking of the heart, that more than our furniture was being taken away from us. Something was going out of the relation between us.

She would have seen me at a moment of crisis, when I had failed her. No matter that my excuse was solid, no matter that she herself would have tried to prevent me from running risks of serious injury—the unalterable fact was that I, the male, invested by all biological law and social tradition with the responsibility for the protection of our home, had lifted no finger.

Surely in every woman, no matter how civilized, how tender and compassionate, the fundamental primitive instinct of the cave continues—an instinct not to be violated with impunity by her mate.

The silence between us seemed to become significant; her clear profile was painfully inscrutable, or so it seemed to me. I began to suffer under the tormenting anticipation of time to come when an unspoken and unanswered question would arise like a gray cloud between us, swirling all through our days and nights. But she, of course, denies having had any such notions; and that is well.

Hecklin's thugs finished their operations upstairs and came down to the living room. They were lifting up our Phyfe sofa when Hecklin suddenly spoke. I could feel the other two men pause and turn, the sofa in the air, as he addressed my wife.

"I hope you realize I am being very easy on you. Very easy."

It is hard to convey the tone. There was nothing sensual about it, or about the expression on his face—nothing of what showed in the eyes of the man called Joe every time he passed my wife, and appraised her up and down.

Rather, Hecklin seemed to be animated by a certain pride in his self-restraint, by—it seems absurd to write it, but I felt it—a desire to be appreciated.

I can see his point of view, I think. He was a man to whom the possession of advantage normally meant the full and uninhibited use of it. And here he was, restraining himself. Did we understand? Were we duly impressed?

Perhaps he saw the temperance of his attitude as a return for our hospitality. There are many neurotics whose craving to be liked leads them into queer uncertainties and contradictions of behavior.

My wife, like myself, was far more concerned with what the incessantly leering Joe might contemplate in her direction than with Hecklin. But his, "I am being very easy on you," infuriated her.

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Under her breath she said, "Swine!"

I do not think Hecklin heard the word, but he caught the sense. He flushed darkly, and said, "Joe."

The short man put down his end of the sofa which was now almost out of the door and came over to us. Hecklin said, "Not her. Him."

Before I realized what was to happen, Joe lashed out for a second time with his heavy boot. It caught me almost on the same spot as the previous kick. For a while I thought my leg was broken.

My wife screamed, "My God! *He* didn't say anything!"

Through the throbbing in my brain I heard Hecklin answer her. "It is better than for your leg, is it not?"

The short man was still standing in front of me. "More, boss?" he said in a persuasive voice.

"That's all," said Hecklin.

Reluctantly Joe moved back to the door, looking at my wife with a grin. "I'd like to teach *her*," he said with an intake of the breath.

"Shut up," said Hecklin.

The sofa went out of the door.

Hecklin turned back to us. He was becoming less taciturn—I suppose because his work was nearing its end, and the chances of interruption were negligible. The time was getting on toward two o'clock, and except for the crickets the night was perfectly quiet.

Evidently my wife's epithet was still working in his mind, for with a lowering look he reiterated his previous thought. "You do not realize how kind I am being to you. I could do a lot more than I do. Please notice that."

This time my wife kept silence; as for me even if I could have spoken my leg occupied my entire consciousness.

Hecklin went on, "I could tie you up tight to those chairs and leave you there all night. And worse things. Much worse." Again there was a little pause. "But," he added, "I do not think it is necessary. I do not like this ruffian business, like Joe."

I think he would have liked my wife to say, "Thank you." When she said nothing he compressed his lips and scowled.

Joe and the other man came back, and in a few minutes the last few valuable pieces in the house had gone out on the road. All that was left in the living room was a piano, an old couch, and some occasional chairs.

Then Hecklin once more put Joe in charge of us and began to wander around the room. He examined some pieces of silverware in a cupboard and evidently rejected them as beneath consideration. Thereafter the dozen paintings occupied him. He was obviously puzzled. He turned to my wife and said, "These things are valuable?"

"Not very," she answered quietly. I could see that her nails were digging into her palm.

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He looked undecided. "I think you are lying," he said. "Still . . ." Finally he shrugged; I imagine that he considered the risk of handling such unfamiliar booty too great. I could sense that my wife released her breath in a faint sigh as he told the men, "All right. That's all. Start loading."

The men went out to the truck while Hecklin stayed at the window and watched them. Had that been all, had they merely taken our furniture and gone, I think—I know—that we would have done nothing to prevent them. We were waiting almost as one waits at the bedside of a dying and suffering friend—grieved, but praying that it would soon be over.

But then that one small and incalculable thing happened, which so often in crises twists events out of their obvious shape.

My wife's cat came out of the kitchen where her basket is and walked delicately into the living room, stopping to stretch on the way. Her favorite chair, where she was accustomed to lie, was gone; so was the table against whose leg she liked to rub herself.

Ruffled by these changes in her domestic arrangements, she sauntered toward us with marked reserve. My wife put out her hand, but the cat ignored it. Instead she studied Mr. Hecklin's trousered legs for a moment and moved toward him.

He was looking out of the window when the cat rubbed herself against him. He started and swore violently. The cat backed off a foot or two and stared at him, annoyed. Before my wife could speak, Hecklin had kicked at her savagely.

She was a small animal and his shoe caught her squarely under her jawbone, from the side.

My wife gave a little cry as the cat thudded against the wall. Then she snatched away the hand which she had placed on my shoulder and ran over to the animal. It was twitching and moaning, and presently a thin trickle of blood appeared at the corner of its mouth. My wife picked it up gently, and returning to her chair, held it in her lap. She was not crying, but her face was very flushed. After a while the cat became still.

Hecklin did not look at us. He was, I feel certain, rather ashamed. When there was a crash of wood on wood from the road he seized upon it as a welcome diversion. "Fools!" he said roughly. "I told them to be careful!"

He turned to my wife. "You stay there," he ordered. He had no fear, it was obvious enough, of anything she might do. Then he walked swiftly out of the house and crossed the lawn.

He had hardly gone when my wife rose, and putting the cat on the carpet, ran into the hall. I did not at once guess her purpose, but seeing her face I tried vainly to grunt a warning through my gag.

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Ignoring my futile sounds, she knelt for a moment over her brother's old chest and came back carrying his .22 and a box of "long" cartridges from our ammunition shelf. With what seemed to me appalling care, she pushed a cartridge into the breech and poured several more into the chamber of the rifle. Without any nervousness or hesitation she knelt at the open window and adjusted the sights.

There was an electric light in the truck and Hecklin's figure was clearly visible on the road, among the furniture, about eighty feet away. We could hear him giving orders to the other two men, who were lifting the sofa into the truck. I prayed that my wife would have sense enough to turn out the lights, and to my relief she did, pressing the switch near her a moment before she fired.

It was an amazing shot. The bullet, as I determined later, entered the back of Hecklin's head. From where I sat I could see him drop in an oddly awkward series of motions, like a scarecrow detached from its stick.

With the absolute economy of motion that I had so often admired at target practice, my wife ejected the shell, cocked the rifle, and aimed again. The other two men had jumped down from the back of the truck, cursing, and one—it proved to be Joe—began firing his pistol at us from the cover of the truck.

A bullet smacked into the wall behind me, and I tried to force my chair over on its side; but I was bound so tightly that I could do nothing more than move it somewhat out of range by a series of little jogs.

The tall man, with what I still think was surprising courage, ran to Hecklin's body and tried to drag it to the truck. It was he whom my wife shot next. She pumped three bullets at him in rapid succession; one of them nicked his spine. He screamed and groaned for a few seconds, and then was silent. He did not die, however, for some time.

The man Joe had meanwhile put half a dozen bullets through our window, but he was shooting high. When he saw that he was left alone, he jumped into the cab of the truck and started to drive away.

My wife fired twice quickly, and then again once.

The truck, in low gear, slowly moved off the road and crashed to a halt against the stone fence. I could see Joe's big head in the cab, against a moonlit cloud behind him. My wife sighted deliberately, and fired again, and the body slowly toppled out of sight.

Later it was found to have one bullet in the shoulder, one through the neck, and one in the brain. With any other target, this might have been called beautiful shooting.

We waited in the dark for a

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while without saying a word. Nothing stirred outside except the autumn leaves on the ground, rustled by a small east wind. Even the crickets had become silent. My wife began to sob quietly.

After a while she came over to me and felt for my lips with her hands. I smothered my feelings while she pulled off the tape. She was shivering as she went into the kitchen, got a knife, and cut me free. Still nothing happened outside.

I stood up and took her in my arms and we remained so for perhaps a minute. Finally I said, "We can't stay here like this. I'd better go see."

She did not answer, so I kissed her, and taking the gun went out the back door. I circled cautiously until I could make sure that none of them was playing 'possum.

Hecklin was dead enough, and so was Joe, in the truck. But the paralyzed man in the road troubled me. He had recovered consciousness and was evidently in great pain. The poor devil had played almost a silent part in the robbery, and it seemed unfair that he should suffer the most. I tried to lift him, but the way he rolled his eyes and moaned stopped me. Finally I compromised with my conscience by putting my coat under his head. He was dead before the police came.

It was some time before I went back to the dark house to find my wife lying on the couch and crying with those deep sobs which, however agonizing to hear, nevertheless tell of the passing of a hysterical crisis. Presently she regained command of herself, and we went out together.

When we found that the tires of our car were ruined I took the dead man—rather callously it seems to me now—out of Hecklin's truck, and my wife and I drove down to the Murdocks.

And that was really all.

The State Police and local authorities were understanding, and the matter died out of the press as quickly as could be expected. For a while my wife and I avoided talking about the episode, but recently we have broken through our constraint and explored every detail. She is capable of discussing the shooting quite unemotionally now, as if two other people had been concerned.

In some ways, in fact, I think the consciousness of having killed has changed her point of view for the better. It has certainly mellowed her, made her more tolerant of other people's foibles and irrational behavior. Only last week she told me, that if I really wanted to hunt, she would not mind.

But curiously—or is it curious?—I no longer want to hunt.

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A companion piece to the next story in this issue . . .

TEN MONTHS' BLUNDER

by JERRY NEAL WILLIAMSON

WHEN CELERY KEEN WALKED into the back room of the old pawnshop, with its array of weapons spread across the wall and its owner crumpled on the floor, he found his father the Inspector glowering at a motley trio of men.

Sergeant Realie leaned one of his seven-foot wide shoulders against the door, which caved in, and growled, "Look out for that there rug, Mr. Keen, sir."

"Ah," said Celery brightly, falling to his knees and running his silver eyes across the rug. "Splendid! Either an Axminster or an original Jacquard. As it nears the maximum of a hundred and twenty-eight tufts to the square inch, the probability resides with the former."

"I only meant that it was a throw rug and I was afraid you'd slip on it," growled Sergeant Realie, as he pried his shoulder out of the door. "I know how hard it is for you to see with them pants-nays pinchin' your sinuses."

Celery clucked like a chicken (one of his better impressions) and stood up. "Ah, Dad. I see you are interrogating the suspects. Please don't forget Dr. Samuel Johnson: 'Questioning is not the mode of conversation among gentlemen.'"

The Inspector said peevishly, "'Lo, son. You been hittin' the Bartlett's again?"

"Just a small solution," Celery declared.

"That's all I'm looking for," said the aged Inspector, glowering for practice. "This case is in your line."

"Ah. Indeed?" Celery's silver eyes glittered. "Splendid. Tell me, have you identified yonder corpus?"

"Yonder corpus is Orebaugh Christy, owner of the pawnshop."

"So! Corpus Christy! Is he from Texas?"

"What do you make of the message on the wall?"

Celery's sharp sensitive sensible silver gaze scrutinized the wall. "Ah! The word FAN—in Christy's own blood!"

As he spoke, Celery whipped a tape measure and a large magnifying glass from his pocket. Then he trotted noiselessly about the room, sometimes stopping, occasionally kneeling, and once lying flat on his face (when he tripped on the throw rug). The other men in the room were irresistibly reminded of a pure-blooded, well-trained foxhound. At last he stopped.

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"Tell me, Dad, what have you found out about the array of weapons on the wall above the bloody word?"

"This old man Christy was a real eccentric. Only interest he had in life was his collection of guns."

"A splendid display, too." Celery's thin nostrils began to quiver. "Colt single-actions, muskets, fowling pieces, breechloaders, shotguns and rifles, even blunderbusses and derringers."

"Nice job of reading the signs, son. Now help me with the questioning. These three characters here are Christy's only friends. Righty Dugan, Angelo Angelissimo, and Lefty Bilphrick."

"Indeed. You, Mr. Dugan," began Celery, inserting Turkish tobacco in his portable hookah. "May I ask how you happened to lose your left arm?"

"I turned around in a subway at rush hour."

"Are you married?"

"Naw, I'm a nut for night baseball. Lefty here, he was my hero."

"Commendable. We'll get to Lefty in a moment. You, Mr. Angelissimo. How did you happen to know the late Orebaugh Christy?"

"I happen to know the late Orebaugh Christy because we both were wild about guns."

"Oh? Are you a collector?"

"No, I'm a crook."

Celery Keen's silver eyes seldom missed a trick. "That paper fan you have there. You carry it with you everywhere, Mr. Angelessimo?"

"Yeah, I carry it with me everywhere I go. It was a gift from my gypsy sweetheart, Gay Lombardo. She stopped going with me, though, because I was a ordinary crook without no future." Angelo wept a little. "I lost confidence in myself."

"Perhaps that's why you're a confidence man. 'The prickly thorn often bears soft roses,' said Ovid."

"What team did he manage?" Lefty Bilphrick inquired.

"I remember you from your halcyon days, Mr. Bilphrick. An all-time great pitcher, a phenomenal strikeout artist, till you injured your throwing arm while tossing a shortstop at the umpire. Tell me, Lefty: now that the golden days are gone, what does such a marvelous athlete do with his time?"

"I drink. I think everybody should have a hobby."

"Commendable. Now, then, the murder weapon." Celery squinted at the Colt single-action revolver beside the body. "Ah. Trigger's been filed off. Just as I thought. Well, Dad, I've solved the case."

"Oh, not again," moaned the Inspector. "Well, go into your explanation and let's get on to the denouement."

"Angelo, you carry the gypsy fan a sweetheart gave you. The scarlet word could refer to you. Lefty, I think you struck out twenty-four men in one game years ago."

"I had a lousy catcher," said

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Lefty. "He kept dropping the shortstop."

"And the word FAN is a sports term indicating a strikeout. You could be our guilty party. Now, Righty. You spend all your time watching baseball. That makes you a fan, so you too fit the bloody description."

"Go ride a subway," Righty suggested.

"Oh, you're innocent enough. Because Orebaugh Christy was trying to tell us that the murder weapon is a *fanner*. He couldn't finish the word before he died. Dad, two hands are needed to fire a fanner. In the days of the old west a gunman held the fanner against his right hip and used his left hand to knock the hammer back and fire the cartridge. Having only one arm, Righty must be innocent."

"Then that lets me out," said Lefty. "My throwin' arm is shot."

Celery Keen puffed out his slender chest. "By the process of elimination, that leaves one person."

"It's my environment," said Angelo bitterly. "I was an underprivileged gypsy. Momma was so poor she couldn't afford a crystal ball. I swiped a basketball for her from the school gym."

"Well, that's the way the ball bounces," murmured Celery.

Ten months passed during which the reputation of Celery Keen, great amateur sleuth, spread across the world. He was called to London, Paris, Hong Kong, Montreal, becoming despised by every low enforcement officer on earth. Weary of his travels, Celery at last returned to New York.

"Son," said the aged Inspector, with a glower, "I been trying to reach you for nearly a year. Remember that pawnshop case about the gun collector?"

Celery nodded. "I was a veritable wizard in that case, Dad."

"Except, the Inspector said wearily, "you forgot that if a fanner could be fired only by two hands—"

"Yes?"

"It could be fired by *two one*-handed men! They finally confessed."

"They?" asked Celery faintly. "Who?"

"It seems Angelo held Christy in his chair. Righty held the Colt in his right hand and Lefty used his good hand to knock back the hammer. Righty and Lefty confessed this morning—all three of 'em were guilty, son."

Celery Keen was lost in thought. Then his silver eyes took on a strange sparkle. "Dad? Does anyone else know about this?"

"Nope, son," said the old man. "Just me. I finally solved a case by myself."

Celery located the fanner in his desk drawer. " 'Success is counted sweetest By those who ne'er succeed,' according to Emily Dickinson." Celery leveled the revolver. "Congratulations, Dad."

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The newest adventure of Ellery Queen . . .

E = MURDER

by ELLERY QUEEN

THE TITLE OF ELLERY'S LECTURE BEING *The Misadventures of Ellery Queen*, it was inevitable that one of the talks on his tour should be crowned by the greatest misadventure of all. It came to pass just after his stint at Bethesda University, in the neighborhood of Washington, D.C., where misadventures of all sorts are commonplace.

Ellery had scribbled the last autograph across the last coed's Humanities I notebook when the nearly empty auditorium resounded with a shout, almost a scream.

"Mr. Queen, wait! Don't go yet!"

The chancellors of great universities do not ordinarily charge down center aisles with blooded cheeks, uttering whoops; and Ellery felt the prickle of one of his infamous premonitions.

"Something wrong, Dr. Dunwoody?"

"Yes! I mean probably! I mean I don't know!" the head of Bethesda U. panted. "The President . . . Pentagon . . . General Carter . . . Dr. Agon doesn't—Oh, hell, Mr. Queen, come with me!"

Hurrying across the campus in the mild Maryland evening by Dr. Dunwoody's heaving side, Ellery managed to untangle the chancellorial verbiage. General Amos Carter, an old friend of Ellery's, had enlisted the services of Dr. Herbert Agon of Bethesda University, one of the world's leading physicists, in a top-secret experimental project for the Pentagon. The President of the United States himself received nightly reports from Dr. Agon by direct wire between the White House and the physicist's working quarters at the top of The Tower, Bethesda U.'s science citadel.

Tonight, at the routine hour, Dr. Agon had failed to telephone the President. The President had then called Agon, and Agon's phone had rung unanswered. A call to the Agon residence had elicited the information from the physicist's wife that, as far as she knew, her husband was working as usual in his laboratory in The Tower.

"That's when the President phoned General Carter," Dr. Dunwoody wailed. "It happens that the General was closeted with me in my office—a, well, a personal matter—and that's where the President reached him.

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When General Carter heard that you were on campus, Mr. Queen, he asked me to fetch you. He's gone on ahead to The Tower."

Ellery accelerated. If Dr. Agon's experiments involved the President of the United States and General Amos Carter, any threat to the safety of the physicist would, like the shot fired by the rude bridge that arched the flood, echo round the world.

He found the entrance to the ten-story aluminum-and-glass Tower defended by a phalanx of campus police. But the lobby was occupied by three people: General Amos Carter; a harassed-looking stalwart in uniform, the special guard on Tower night duty; and a young woman of exceptional architecture whose pretty face was waxen and lifeless.

"But my husband," the young woman was saying, like a machine—a machine with a Continental accent. "You have no right, General. I must see my husband."

"Sorry, Mrs. Agon," General Carter said. "Oh, Ellery—"

"What's happened to Dr. Agon, General?"

"I found him dead. Murdered."

"Murdered?" The crimson in Chancellor Dunwoody's cheeks turned to ashes. "Pola. Pola, how dreadful."

General Carter stood like a wall. "It's dreadful in more ways than one, Doctor. All Agon's notes on his experiments have been stolen. Ellery, for the next few minutes I can use your advice."

"Of course, General. First, though, if I may . . . Mrs. Agon, I understand from Dr. Dunwoody that you're a scientist in your own right, a laboratory technician in Bethesda's physics department. Were you assisting your husband in his experiments?"

"I know nothing of them," Pola Agon's mechanical voice said. "I was a refugee, and although I am now a naturalized citizen and have security clearance, it is not for such high priority work as Herbert was doing."

Dr. Dunwoody patted the young widow's hand and she promptly burst into unscientific tears. The chancellor's arm sneaked about her. Ellery's brows went aloft. Then, abruptly, he turned to General Carter and the guard.

The top floor of The Tower, he learned, consisted of two rooms: the laboratory and the private office that housed Dr. Agon's secret project for the Pentagon. It was accessible by only one route, a self-service, nonstop elevator from the lobby.

"I suppose no one may use this elevator without identification and permission, Guard?"

"That's right, sir. My orders are to sign all visitors bound for the top floor in and out of this visitors' book. There's another book, just like it,

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in Dr. Agon's office, as a further check." The guard's voice lowered. "There was only one visitor tonight, sir. Take a look."

Ellery took the ledger. He counted 23 entries for the week. The last name—the only one dated and timed as of that evening—was James G. Dunwoody.

"You saw Dr. Agon tonight, Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Queen." The chancellor was perspiring. "It had nothing to do with his work, I assure you. I was with him only a few minutes. I left him alive—"

The General snapped, "Guard?" and the guard at once stepped over to block the lobby exit, feeling for his holster. "You go on up to Agon's office, Ellery, and see what it tells you—it's all right, I've locked the laboratory door." The General turned his grim glance on the head of Bethesda University and the murdered man's widow. "I'll be up in a minute."

General Carter stepped out of the elevator and said, "Well, Ellery?"

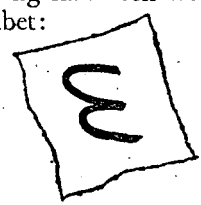
Ellery straightened up from the physicist's office desk. He had found Agon's body seated at the desk and slumped forward, a steel letter-knife sticking out of his back. The office was a shambles.

"Look at this, General."

"Where'd you find *that?*"

"In Agon's right fist, crumpled into a ball."

Ellery had smoothed it out. It was a small square memorandum slip, in the center of which something had been written in pencil. It looked like a script letter of the alphabet:



"E," General Carter said. "What the devil's that supposed to mean?"

Ellery's glance lifted. "Then it isn't a symbol connected with the project, General—code letter, anything like that?"

"No. You mean to tell me Agon wrote this before he died?"

"Apparently the stab wasn't immediately fatal, although Agon's killer might have thought it was. Agon must have revived, or played dead, until his killer left, and then, calling on his remaining strength, penciled this symbol. If it has no special meaning for you, General, then we're confronted with a dying message in the classic tradition—Agon's left a clue to his murderer's identity."

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The General grunted at such outlandish notions. "Why couldn't he have just written the name?"

"The classic objection. The classic reply to which is that he was afraid his killer might come back, notice it, and destroy it," Ellery said unhappily, "which I'll admit has never really satisfied me." He was scowling at the symbol in great puzzlement.

General Carter fell back on orderly facts. "All I know is, only one person came up here tonight, and that was Dunwoody. I happen to know that Dunwoody's in love with Pola Agon. In fact, they had a blowup about it at the Agons' house last night—Agon himself told me about it, and that's why I was in Dunwoody's office this evening. I don't give a damn about these people's private lives, but Agon was important to the United States, and I couldn't have him upset. Dunwoody admits he lost his temper when Agon accused him of making a play for Mrs. Agon—called Agon a lot of nasty names. But he claims he cooled down overnight, and came up here tonight to apologize to Agon.

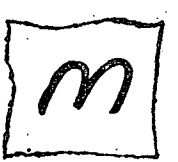
"For my money," the General went on grimly, "Dunwoody came up here tonight to kill Agon. It's my hunch that this Pola Agon is a cleverly planted enemy agent, out after Agon's experimental notes. She's played Mata Hari to Dunwoody—she's sexy enough!—and got him to do her dirty work. It wouldn't be the first time an old fool's turned traitor because of his hormones! But we'll find those notes—they haven't had time to get them away. Ellery, you listening?"

"E," Ellery said.

"What?"

"E," Ellery repeated. "It doesn't fit with the name James G. Dunwoody—or with Pola Agon, for that matter. Could it refer to Einstein's $E = mc^2$, where E stands for energy . . . ?" He broke off suddenly. "Well, well! Maybe it isn't an E after all, General!"

He had moved the memorandum slip a quarter turn clockwise. What General Carter now saw was:



"But turned that way it's an M!" the General exclaimed. "Who's M? There's no initial M in this, either." He eyed the dead physicist's phone nervously. "Look, Ellery, thanks and all that, but I can't sit on this much longer. I've got to notify the President . . ."

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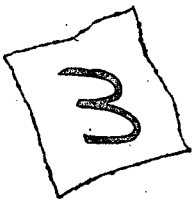
"Wait," Ellery murmured. He had given the memo slip another quarter turn clockwise.



"Now it's a 3!"

"Does 3 mean anything to you or the project, General?"

"No more than the others."

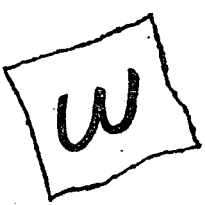
"Visitor number 3 . . . ? Let me see that check-in book of his." Ellery seized the duplicate visitors' book on the dead man's desk. "Agon's third visitor this week was . . ."

"Who?" General Carter rasped. "I'll have him picked up right away!"

"It was you, General," Ellery said. "Of course, I assume—"

"Of course," the General said, reddening. "Now what the deuce are you doing?"

Ellery was giving the memo sheet still another clockwise quarter turn. And now, astonishingly, it read:



"W?"

"No," Ellery said slowly. "I don't think it's a W . . . General, wasn't Agon of Greek extraction?"

"So what?"

"So Agon might well have intended this to stand for the Greek letter omega. The omega looks very like an English small script *w*."

"Omega. The end." The General snorted. "This was certainly Agon's end. Poetry yet!"

"I doubt if a scientist *in extremis* would be likely to think in poetic terms. Numbers would be more in character. And omega is the last letter of the twenty-four letter Greek alphabet. Number twenty-four, General. Doesn't something strike you?"

General Carter threw up his hands. "No! What?"

"Twenty-four's proximity to the number of visitors Agon actually received up here this week—which was twenty-three, you'll recall, Dr. Dun-

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woody tonight being the twenty-third. Surely that suggests that Agon meant to indicate *a twenty-fourth visitor*—someone who came after Dunwoody? And if that's true, Agon's killer was his twenty-fourth visitor. That's what Agon was trying to tell us!"

"It doesn't tell me a thing."

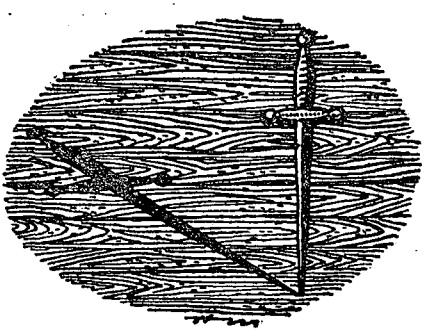
"It tells us why Agon didn't write his killer's name or initials. He denoted his visitor by number, not because he was afraid the killer might return and destroy the clue—a pretty far-fetched thought process for a man nine-tenths dead!—but because *he simply didn't know his murderer's name.*"

General Carter's eyes narrowed. "But that would mean it was someone Agon knew only by sight!"

"Exactly," Ellery said. "And if you'll do a security recheck on the skunk, General, you'll find it's his loyalty to the United States, not Mrs. Agon's or Dunwoody's, that's been subverted."

"*What* skunk?" the General bellowed.

"The only skunk who could have got up here without signing in. That worried-looking night guard on duty in the lobby."



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EMILY NEFF**

TITLE: ***The Love Sportsman***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALE: Southern California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Roger was young, handsome, wealthy, and charming. Few women could resist him. Few women did . . . until he met Lita.*

PURELY FROM HABIT, ROGER Brucker set about giving his house a romantic atmosphere. He knew from experience just which lights to dim and which to turn out altogether. He had learned that the drapes must be drawn, although it seemed a pity to shut out the view of the softly lighted swimming pool and the thread of moon.

Tonight these familiar preparations were quite futile—a mockery; but they gave him something to do while he waited for Lita. And while background might not help it could hardly hinder.

Although he went about achieving the desired effect with the ease of a veteran stage manager, he emotions were in a state of turmoil. His hand shook as he changed the position of a throw-pillow on the sofa, and he made an exclamation of disgust at realizing that his poise had deserted him.

An air of quiet dignity, tinged with sadness, was his aim, and it irked him that he was still capable of such callow manifestations as a pounding heart and a shaking hand.

The liquor tray, usually an important (and sometimes essential) prop in his amorous episodes, was not in evidence tonight. Lita did not drink, so Roger walked to the den and poured himself a fortifying shot from the bar.

Roger was twenty-six. He possessed the fortunate endowments of good looks and wealth, enhanced by an appealingly ingenuous charm. Few women could resist the combination. Few women had. Until Lita.

He had come to this Southern

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California town, after an Eastern university and several years abroad, to manage (nominally) one of his father's numerous and enormously profitable fruit canneries which dotted the West coast. Far from stupid, Roger had seen at once that the plant in his charge was being run admirably by a conscientious man named Schultz. So he wisely refrained from intruding, and confined his business activities to a tour of the plant twice a week and a glance at the books once a month. Meanwhile, he purchased an ultra-modern house, with pool, on a mountainside, and devoted his energies to cultivating the "natives."

An attractive bachelor is always a welcome addition to a group, and Roger soon found himself much in demand. He played good tennis, fair golf, danced well, and conversed entertainingly. Efforts were made to pair him up with various eligible girls, and his little black book was soon full, but he remained elusive as a marital catch.

He supposed that one day he would marry, but he was not in the least hurry. He was content, for the nonce, to flit from blossom to blossom, like a bee in a vast, enticing flower garden.

Roger's conquests included several of the wives in the social community. He was quick to sense the susceptibility of a young, bored matron, and could assess the signs in his favor unerringly. Was the lady's husband inattentive? Was she panicky at passing thirty? Did too much leisure make her restless?

He was proud of his accuracy in spotting vulnerable game; also, the hazard of discovery lent added zest to the sport. He got an ironic kick out of lunching with a man whose wife he had made love to the previous afternoon, or from playing poker with a group, several of whom he had cuckolded. His friends knew Roger to be a gay dog with the ladies, and joked him about it good-naturedly and rather enviously. But none suspected his own wife of falling prey.

Lita King seemed cut to pattern for Roger's specifications. Not only was she tiny and brunette, a type Roger greatly admired, but her husband, a wealthy broker, was at least twenty years her senior and deeply engrossed in his business. She was twenty-eight, beautiful and childless. It seemed a perfect set-up, and not the slightest doubt of success crossed Roger's mind as he pondered his tactics.

His first move was to get himself invited to as many parties as possible where he knew she would be present, and this was not difficult. Next, he set about ingratiating himself with her husband. Trevor King, while pleasant enough, turned out to be as stodgy and dry as Roger could have hoped, and he was convinced that Lita could have small affection for this walking comptometer.

Toward Lita, Roger was respect-

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ful, polite, and rather wistful. "I'm still pretty much of a stranger here," he would say as they danced. "People have been kind, but . . . well . . . I guess a bachelor just doesn't fit in." Several such remarks were calculated to elicit an invitation to drop in at the Kings', but somehow Lita failed to rise to the bait.

"You seem to have made lots of friends," she observed.

"Oh, mainly just acquaintances, I'm afraid."

It was finally Trevor King, not his wife, who asked Roger to come to a large party the Kings were giving—and only after Roger had dropped a broad hint. Roger hated to resort to unsubtleties.

On the night of the party Lita met him at the door with her cool smile. "How nice of you to come, Mr. Brucker." Was there just a trace of sarcasm in her voice? She introduced him to the others and left him stranded (purposely, he suspected) with a raucous blonde in a chartreuse dress.

All evening he tried to snatch a few words with his hostess, but she moved quickly and gracefully among her guests, always just beyond his reach. It was with a feeling of frustration that he finally left the party, with Lita's formal "Good night, Mr. Brucker," ringing in his ears—mockingly.

However, Roger had had difficult cases before, and he still felt confident of breaking down Lita's reserve. A week after the party he dropped in casually at the Kings'. Lita, entrancing in toreador pants and a silk shirt, took his hat and led him into the library, where her husband was studying a sheaf of business papers. She mixed two drinks and disappeared for the rest of the evening, leaving Roger to a droning commentary on the current stock market trends.

Perhaps, he thought, driving home after this fruitless foray, she was simply frightened by her husband's jealousy. Men of his age were notoriously possessive of young wives. Roger decided to stop by some afternoon when Lita was alone.

This time Lita made no move to admit him. "Trevor isn't in, Mr. Brucker," she said. She was wearing shorts and her black hair was tied in back with a ribbon.

"He's not? Oh, I'm sorry," Roger said guilelessly. "I'll drop back later." He turned to go, but as she made no attempt to detain him, he paused and said lightly, "You look about ten in that outfit. I've never seen you with your hair like that." She still made no reply, and Roger felt himself redden under her cool, even gaze. "You might at least invite me in for a cup of tea," he essayed in his wistful tone. "I'm quite harmless."

"Are you?"

"Look here, what makes you so unfriendly, Mrs. King?" he blurted out. "Have I done something

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wrong? Or do you simply not like me?"

"I hardly know you," she said quietly. "And I can't ask you in for the obvious reason that my husband is not here."

Roger gave a short laugh. "The Victorian bit doesn't suit you."

"Doesn't it?"

Roger glared down at her. She was so impossibly pretty. And so impossible. "Have it your own way," he snapped. "Sorry to have disturbed you."

And he turned on his heel and strode off, furious at the rebuff and furious at himself for losing his self-control. He was almost certain she was laughing at him.

There followed a period when Roger made no effort to see Lita. He threw himself into a series of affairs which were as meaningless as they were easy—and told himself that he was having a good time.

Then, unexpectedly, one night at a club dance, he came face to face with Lita and felt an emotion so strong sweep over him that it was like pain. He cut in on her, and the feeling of her lithe little body against his made him want to crush her to him, consume her, carry her off, spoil, wait on, and protect her.

It dawned on him that he was in love.

"I've missed you," he said.

"Have you?"

"I suppose you think I made a fool of myself, but you've no idea how I feel about you. You're so very lovely, Lita."

"Thank you, Mr. Brucker." It was like ice water in his face.

"Don't laugh at me. I admire your role as a loyal and obedient wife. But aren't you carrying it to extremes? Couldn't we be friends, at least?"

Lita smiled. "There's a poem about a camel," she said. "His nose was cold, so a kind Arab allowed him to put his nose inside his hut. Soon the head followed, then the neck and then the body, and finally the poor Arab was himself pushed out of the hut."

Roger grinned. "You mean, give me an inch and I'll take a mile?"

She chanted:

"'To evil habit's earliest wile
Lend neither ear, nor glance, nor smile—
Choke the dark fountain ere it flows,
Nor e'en admit the camel's nose.'"

"You're not very trusting."

Lita raised her dark eyes to his and a look of candor replaced that of mockery. "There's no point in wasting your time, Roger." It was the first time she had used his first name. "I'm telling you frankly that I am very much in love, and there will never be anyone else. Does that clear the air?"

He could not have been more stunned if she had told him she was a trapeze artist.

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In love with that middle-aged stuffed shirt? Truly, deeply in love?

"Are you sure you know what it *is* to be in love?" he asked harshly.

She gave him a really beautiful smile. "Quite sure."

"Trevor is a fine person, I grant you that, but he's another generation, Lita!"

"Trevor is very kind." For an instant her eyes held a flicker of amusement at his patent misery, then someone cut in and she was whirled away. Roger jostled his way off the dance floor and nearly collided with a gray-haired man on the sidelines. It was Trevor King.

"Hullo, Brucker. Where've you been keeping yourself lately? We've missed you."

This was too much. Roger mumbled something and bolted for the cloakroom.

Dark days followed. In love for the first time in his life, Roger felt that he had been left holding the short end of the stick. It was bad enough that the woman he loved was married, but for her to be virtuous, also, seemed an unfair stroke of Fate. He felt a vague remorse for his years of philandering, feeling that they had somehow led him to this impasse.

For a time he refused all invitations, spent more time at the cannery, and paced his wall-to-wall carpeting at night, playing records and brooding. He decided that Lita was, indeed, an angel, sincerely devoted to her husband, unapproachable, unattainable. He remembered her face as she told him, "I am very much in love, and there will never be anyone else," and thought of what he would give to have her feel that way toward *him*.

Sick of solitude, one night he drove past the King house and saw, through a front window, a flash of red dress which might have been Lita. He began to drive by often thereafter, storing in his mind the brief glimpses he got of her, like fragments of a precious painting.

One night he was just in time to see her drive off—alone, for once; and on impulse he followed her at a cautious distance, wishing he had the nerve to hail her, but knowing that he didn't. He kept his gaze on the back of her head, with its glossy dark hair and a little hat of something like feathers. He intended to follow her only to her destination, acting not out of curiosity, but because he could not bear to let her out of his sight.

When she drew up before an old, unfashionable hotel, however, and hurried through the glass portico, leaving her car for the attendant to park, Roger was frankly baffled. Surely none of her stylish friends would have picked this seedy mausoleum for a party.

Again on impulse, Roger pulled up to the curb, tossed the keys to the attendant, and entered the lobby, just as Lita stepped into an elevator and the doors clanged shut.

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He waited interminably for the creaking cage to descend, and when it did, waited for an elderly couple to shuffle out before he approached.

"Could you tell me where the dark-haired young lady got out?" he asked the ancient operator. "What floor? She's . . . a friend of mine."

The rheumy eyes surveyed Roger skeptically. "Couldn't say," he grunted.

Roger produced a bill. "I'm not going to make trouble," he said. "I just want to ask a couple of questions. And I'll match this if you'll keep it to yourself."

It was several weeks before Roger accumulated enough evidence to convince himself that Lita the Pure, Lita the Exalted, Lita the Unattainable, was actually involved in a hot and heavy love affair. Her lover was one Eliot Aldrich, a married man, attractive but impecunious, whom Roger had encountered occasionally at parties. Their rendezvous had the fixed precision of a timetable: two evenings a week (Mondays and Thursdays), nine until midnight, Room 411 in that dismal, rundown hotel.

Roger faced this shattering discovery with a succession of emotions. His first reaction was one of disillusionment. The pedestal on which he had placed Lita was without substance, built out of his own false trust, and he felt cheated and bereft. He was furious that she had been able to deceive him so completely, and was humiliated at his own gullibility. He even felt a twinge of pity for poor old Trevor, his fellow-victim in the deception.

Agonies of black jealousy assailed him when he thought of Eliot Aldrich. The mental image of Lita and Aldrich, locked in sweet intimacy in their sordid bower, threw him into torture.

Gradually, however, he began to appreciate the irony of the situation and to seek some consolation in the new lay of the land. If the generous Mrs. King had time for Aldrich, a married man, night she not also find time for Roger Brucker, a lonely bachelor? Ever an opportunist, Roger shrewdly began to turn matters to his advantage.

He envisioned an interview with Lita, wherein he would unmask her and bring her to her knees. He held all the cards. How he would relish exposing her!

"You certainly are the prettiest liar I've ever met," he would say lightly. "And one of the cleverest. You had me fooled. And poor old Trevor—he's quite in the dark, isn't he?"

There would be a faint intake of breath and then she would say quickly, "I can't imagine what you're talking about."

"You know, I'm jealous of your friend Eliot Aldrich. Even if you're only with him twice a week. But tell me, do you really find that sordid hotel comfortable. Isn't the atmosphere a bit—well second-rate?"

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Would Lita weep? Would she cry out for him to stop? Whatever her reaction, he would continue impassively: "When I first stumbled upon this 'love nest'—and I made the discovery quite by accident, I assure you—I was shocked. I had put you on a pedestal, Lita. Pure in mind and heart—the truly faithful wife. I was content to worship from afar—well, perhaps not content, but resigned. Then, I began to think—perhaps this is more a blessing than a blow. Perhaps there is more room in your heart than I had supposed—room, even, for another . . ."

She would flare up at that, but he would put his arms around her, gently, tenderly, and say, "Don't hate me, Lita, I'm doing this because I love you, because I can't bear to be without you. I can make you happy, darling. Won't you let me try?"

If this was not effective, his next step was obvious, and its results assured: "Very well, then. But I'm afraid I shall feel it my duty to let poor old Trevor know that his wife—"

Lita would crumple. "Oh, no," she would whisper. "No."

"That alarms you, does it? You love dear Eliot, but Trevor is the goose that lays the golden eggs, isn't he?"

Her capitulation would follow inevitably—how could it fail to? At first she might hate him, but little by little he would win her love. He would make her forget Eliot Aldrich—he might even, some day, marry her.

Roger rehearsed this interview over and over in his mind, polishing his remarks, imagining every possible way in which Lita might react and preparing substitute strategies. The encounter became as vivid in his mind as a scene from a play.

At length he set a date for making his plan a reality, and with a pounding heart drove one afternoon to the street where the Kings lived. He slowed his car at the sight of Lita in the garden. She was picking flowers, demure in a soft, blue sun-dress, and his heart turned a somersault at the sight of her.

He drove on without stopping. As if autonomically propelled, the car took Roger away from that street, out of the neighborhood, out of the town, and into the rising and dipping roads of foothills and canyons. Dusk was falling when he returned home.

Roger mixed himself a stiff drink and settled down for a talk with himself.

"Well, Casanova," he began. "What became of your great showdown scene? Didn't you rehearse it enough? Or don't you fancy yourself as a blackmailer?"

No reply.

"What? Are you beginning to experience qualms of conscience? Dare you admit that a glimpse of Lita with a bouquet of lilacs against her breast—like a sentimental cal-

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endar picture—deflected you from your purpose?"

Again, no reply.

Roger put his head in his hands. He realized that he could no more reveal to Lita what he knew—much less threaten her with exposure—than he could cut off his own right hand. His imagined interview had been nothing more than an emotional catharsis—an end in itself.

He wanted only for Lita to be happy. If marriage to a rich old man and a furtive liaison with a poor young man satisfied her, Roger would not interfere. The idea of bargaining for her affections was so repulsive, so unthinkable, that he wondered how he could have ever conceived it.

After years of indulging his own pleasures and passions, Roger was now discovering the tyranny of love, and the sacrifices that love demanded. It was a new and bewildering experience for him, accompanied by a rather lofty sensation of noble renunciation. He would never reveal Lita's secret. He would always love her—with a doomed, self-abnegating devotion like that of Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities,* and other heroic figures.

On an impulse he telephoned his father long-distance and asked to be transferred to another cannery. "I'm getting stale here, Dad," he explained. "How about something in Oregon, for a change? Yes, the sooner the better."

The shift was arranged, and Roger prepared to leave within the month. He hoped that the new plant would be in the charge of someone as efficient as Schultz.

There remained only his farewell to Lita. For, Roger reasoned, what sacrifice is truly a sacrifice if it is not recognized as such?—except, of course, in books. He was prepared to slip out of Lita's life nobly but not silently. It seemed only fair that she should know that he was giving her up deliberately, at great personal pain.

He telephoned.

"This is Roger," he said "Your camel. May I see you alone, Lita, just for a moment or two, tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid I . . ."

"Please, Lita. It's terribly important that I talk to you."

"Really important?"

"Believe me."

There was a long pause. "Very well," she said at last. "But don't come here. I'll drop by your house after dinner. Say about nine?"

He hung up, pleased but puzzled that she had suggested coming to his house. Could it be possible that she had undergone a change of heart? That she was beginning to care for him?

He pushed this tantalizing thought aside.

Now, as he prepared for Lita's arrival, broken phrases came to his lips: "Sorry for having forced myself . . . Wish you could have felt

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differently . . . I'll never forget you . . . Think of me sometimes."

Of course he would make no allusion to her affair, but his knowledge of it would add poignancy to the scene.

He put a record on the hi-fi, and replaced a fallen flower in a vase just as the door chime sounded.

Lita looked more beautiful than he had ever seen her.

"You are a clumsy detective, Roger," she said quietly. "I have been expecting your call. But if you think that you can blunder into my life and ruin the one beautiful thing I have, you are very much mistaken."

In the brief instant before Lita shot him, Roger Brucker, newly reformed, thought how unfair, how very unfair . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	THEODORE MATHIESON
TITLE:	*Alexandre Dumas, Detective*
TYPE:	Detective Story
LOCALE:	Saint-Germain, France
TIME:	1848
COMMENTS:	*When Dumas named his castle the Chateau de Monte Cristo, and had a costume party with guests dressed like characters from his famous novel, he was considered insane—but the murders were even more insane!*

ONE WARM MORNING IN JULY, 1848, the citizens of Saint-Germain, a village of some thirty kilometers from Paris, were startled to see the famous playwright and novelist, Alexandre Dumas, driving his own carriage briskly down the Rue de la Seine. Dumas stopped in front of the office of the village newspaper, *La Presse,* and turned to speak excitedly to his companion in the carriage, his good friend Raoul de Frontenac.

At once a small crowd began to gather. Never before had the famous man appeared in their town unheralded and without a coachman dressed in fine livery; never before had he failed to greet them in his warm manner. Now he seemed unaware of their existence.

Dumas, on his part, was too agitated to notice the crowd. He sprang down, leaving de Frontenac in the carriage, and entered the newspaper office.

The outer chamber was empty, but Dumas walked back into the press room. There he found the editor and owner of *La Presse,* Julian Nodier, alone—a tall, melancholy-faced man in his mid-thirties, who looked up from a galley sheet.

"Good day, Monsieur Dumas," he said with a politeness that contrasted curiously with the cold hostility in his eyes. "We meet for the first time."

He looked at the novelist's short, thickening figure through narrowed eyes, as if he gauged him

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for physical combat. Dumas was forty-five, his great shock of wiry hair beginning to turn gray; but his round full face was still tight-skinned and youthful, and his small dark eyes were bright, shrewd, and forever on the watch.

Dumas took out a copy of *La Presse.*

"You knew I'd come about this?"

"Sooner or later," the editor said casually. "You have come to protest?"

Dumas forced a smile. "It is not every day that a man insinuates to the public that the great Dumas is not right in the head!"

"Let those who will try to gainsay me study the record," replied Nodier. "Monsieur Dumas writes a book that everybody reads—*The Count of Monte Cristo.* Bien! But that is not enough. He must come to Saint-Germain, making a big stir with his fame, and upon the road to Bougeval he must build a country house like a castle, spending five hundred thousand francs, and call it his Chateau de Monte Cristo. Lakes, fountains, and—mon Dieu—even a tower keep!"

Dumas nodded vigorously, still keeping his temper.

"And there is even more, Monsieur Nodier, of which you have not heard. Next week I plan a housewarming, and all the guests will be dressed like the characters in *The Count of Monte Cristo.*"

"How far will this madness go!"

"You call it madness, dear fellow. I call it—imagination."

"There are others who see your actions as I do. The Paris papers accept avidly the copy I send them, and even the local Prefect of Police—"

Dumas slapped his hands together in mock impatience.

"And now that I have added to your store of calumny, you will doubtless use it against me."

"Did you think I would not? Let me tell you, I shall retract not one word of what I have said. If you wish satisfaction, you may strike me in the face with that paper, Monsieur, and I shall give you a chance to get it!"

Dumas took a deep breath; there were beads of sweat upon his brow.

"No, no," he murmured, but did not look the editor in the face. "You write with such a flow of spleen that I know I cannot staunch it with a mere word. I only come today to inquire *why* you should feel so bitter against me. Perhaps you have been thwarted in the theatre?"

"I never visit the theatre!" said the other contemptuously.

"You envy the rich and successful, perhaps?"

"Never!"

"Then where lies your resentment?"

For a moment the editor looked as if he were about to tell him, then his lips locked tight.

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"Look, mon ami," the dramatist said slowly, "I admit I am a vain man, and easily given to outburst. But my good friend Raoul de Frontenac, who awaits me outside, made me promise to hold my temper and instead of giving you insult, to offer my friendship. You must, of course, write as you please. But meanwhile, let me invite you to be my guest at the chateau housewarming. Come see for yourself the good time we shall have, and that the way we enjoy ourselves is anything but madness."

The editor looked long and hard at Dumas, and then his lip tightened scornfully.

"You try to corrupt me with your offer of friendship, Monsieur, but you cannot. I shall let everyone know of this new piece of madness. And do not tell me the world is not listening! I heave heard that your own wife, who lives as far away as Italy, has heard the rumor, and has sent her Parisian lawyer to Saint-Germain to investigate. Let him come to me, and I shall tell—"

But he got no further. Dumas, losing his temper at last, cracked the paper sharply across Nodier's lips and strode out into the street . . .

The duel, with pistols, was held early the next morning in a meadow along the Seine on the road to Poissy. Nodier's shot missed Dumas, but the writer's bullet pierced the editor's right shoulder and spun him back upon the grass.

Dumas went at once to the fallen man's side, but Nodier's hatred of his opponent was so strong that he growled like an animal at Dumas' expression of concern. Dumas retreated as Doctor Jazet, de Frontenac's physician, hurried forward to examine the wound.

Twenty-four hours later Dumas hastened in great excitement to the family home of Raoul de Frontenac. He found his friend in a walled garden, stripped to the waist, exercising upon horizontal bars.

"They came to the chateau last night," Dumas said, sitting disconsolately upon a stone bench. "Partisans of Nodier. With brushes dipped in lampblack, they wrote *MADMAN* upon the garden wall in letters four feet high. Unlike myself, a newcomer, you've lived among the people of Saint-Germain for many years, Raoul. What can I do now?"

De Frontenac stopped exercising and started thoughtfully to rub his torso with a towel. At fifty, de Frontenac was truly a magnificent specimen, with a proud carriage to his distinguished head and the lithe body of a man twenty years younger. Physical fitness was his obsession, and now that his young wife, his second, had recently died in childbirth and the child lay bur-

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ied with her, he lived almost ascetically, never touching wine, and eating meat sparingly.

At last de Frontenac said, "I hear Nodier has recovered and is back at work."

Dumas laid the morning's copy of *La Presse* upon the stone bench. "The duel has only given him more fuel. Now he accuses me of further madness—of imitating my hero Edmond Dantes to the extent of fighting a duel. If such attacks as these go on—"

"You fear everyone will come to believe that Dumas has lost his mind on the subject of Monte Cristo?"

"Well, my wife did send that cursed lawyer from Paris, and those who painted on my walls last night evidently think so."

"Genius is always slightly mad, mon ami, and the French public at large has always embraced their artists' idiosyncrasies with understanding and affection. Of course, it is understandable that the people of Saint-Germain—most of whom work hard, yet remain poor—should resent seeing such a vast fortune spent upon what, in their limited vision, is only a whim, a fancy—"

"The Chateau de Monte Cristo is a wonderful dream come true!" Dumas said with ringing sincerity.

"Of course. And besides, Saint-Germain alone does not count. Although—" De Frontenac paused and then continued with a grave expression, "There is the fact that Nodier's ill will is spreading. Perhaps you ought to give up the idea of the housewarming altogether. It might be held as another mark against you."

"Never! I have promised Mlle. Céleste we would have the party. It was her idea in the first place, and she has worked hard in planning it. Besides, I have never believed an artist should capitulate to bourgeois unimaginativeness."

"You might have to pay for your stubbornness, my friend."

"That I know. What I do not know is how to deal with this rising prejudice."

De Frontenac stood in front of a frescoed wall, his hands behind him, staring up at it. It was a reproduction of David's *Oath of the Horatii,* which showed three stalwart sons receiving swords from their father.

"When I had an artist reproduce in fresco David's original painting," de Frontenac said at last, "I had him make certain changes. First, I had him show the main figures in the nude—to throw into even greater focus their physical perfection; then I had him change the heads and faces to those of myself and my three fine sons by my first wife. The artist thought *I* was mad to tamper with David's concept, conforming it to my own family. He spread the word that I was mad, but do you know how I stopped him, Alexandre?"

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"How?" the novelist asked intently.

"I made a good friend of him. There is no surer way to stop unfavorable gossip than by patching up differences."

"But I tried to befriend Nodier!"

"But there are others, are there not, whom it would be well to win to your side before the housewarming?"

"Of course, of course!" Dumas strode up and down like a general planning a critical strategy. "There is André Cassin in Paris, who brought suit against me last spring. I will write to him at once and invite him to the party."

"None closer to home?" de Frontenac asked.

"Nodier, of course—I shall go to him again. Then there is Vaigres, the sculptor. I quarreled with him over the frieze on the chateau; he left in great heat and talked against me in the village. Yes, I think I shall invite him, too."

"Vaigres is here, working on the tomb of my wives—upon the hill yonder. But—" de Frontenac gave a curious little shudder and said, "I will not go up there with you."

As Dumas climbed the hill behind the de Frontenac mansion, he could see Eugène Vaigres standing inside the little cemetery plot, giving instructions to two workmen. The latter were laboriously setting in place the second of a pair of stone angels upon the corner of a small, marble mausoleum. The sculptor, a dwarfed and humpbacked little figure with black hair and a fierce, hawklike face, turned as Dumas entered the plot and glared at the novelist.

"Beautiful work, Vaigres," Dumas exclaimed enthusiastically. "De Frontenac must be pleased."

"He has not come to see it once," said the other vindictively.

"Oh, I assure you he is very pleased," said Dumas. "And you know, I wish I'd listened to you about that frieze. You were quite right, of course."

"You think so?" Vaigres said warily.

"Absolutely. I'm sorry now we quarrelled about it. In fact, my friend, I would consider it a great favor on your part if you would forget our differences and come to my housewarming next week."

Vaigres hesitated only a second. "Mais oui, Monsieur," he said, glowering at one of the workmen to conceal his pleasure at the invitation. "I have heard of your party. All will come as characters in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, eh? Well, then, who shall I be?"

For a moment Dumas did not reply. He had been studying the mausoleum; over the iron-grated door was cut and gilded the name, *de Frontenac*. Inside were two crypts, side by side. Upon one was carved *Marie de Frontenac* and

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upon the other a single word, *Aimée*. The latter, Raoul's second wife, had been a fragile, pretty little thing, but Dumas recalled that de Frontenac had been rather indifferent to her.

"Well, Monsieur Dumas?" The sculptor stood, hands on hip, verging on renewed anger. The echo of Vaigres' question came back to Dumas.

"You shall be the Count of Monte Cristo's helper, Jacopo—remember?"

And Dumas was gratified to see that the sculptor seemed secretly pleased.

It was a perfect evening for Dumas' party—warm, and with a full moon. From the sun-baked hills came a soft breeze laden with a heady and pungent odor, as if it had passed over deep-cellared vats of fermenting wine. The Chateau de Monte Cristo looked like a setting for a fairy tale. It was an amazing three-storied building with an Henri II façade, an Oriental minaret, and an impressive frieze of the sculptured heads of men of genius from Sophocles to Victor Hugo, including Dumas himself. Candlelight poured from every window into the extensive English garden that surrounded it, and laughter and excited talk blended merrily with the frog chorus from the ponds.

Shortly after Dumas' fifty-odd guests, resplendent in the costumes their host had provided for them, had sat down to supper at the long table in the Louis XV salon, the majordomo, Rasconi, came quietly to Dumas and told him a man had forced his way into the chateau, demanding to see the famous author.

Dumas, dressed in white silk as the Count of Monte Cristo, excused himself and went into the vestibule. A tall figure with his right arm and shoulder bandaged stopped pacing and turned his scornful face to Dumas. It was the editor, Julian Nodier.

"Well, Dumas," Nodier said arrogantly, "you invited me to your party, and I decided to come."

"I am delighted," Dumas said with genuine pleasure. "There are several costumes left—you may take your choice."

"I will appear as myself."

Dumas hesitated, then smiled good-naturedly.

"Very well. In fact, you look distinguished enough as you are! Come, I will introduce you to my guests."

The chattering crowd grew silent as Dumas introduced the editor of *La Presse*, and the murmur that followed when Rasconi made a place for Nodier at the table seemed to mollify the truculent newspaperman.

Dumas, returning to the head of the table, glanced anxiously around at those men who had been his enemies.

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There was young André Cassin, who had arrived from Paris just that afternoon—one of Dumas' former collaborators on his novels, and a vicious malcontent. He was a tall, hollow-cheeked fellow with glittering black eyes. He seemed to be enjoying himself now, however, laughing and talking freely with Dumas' own favorite, Céleste Picaud, the actress.

Vaigres, the humpbacked sculptor, sat with his dark face immobile, speaking to no one, but gloomily drinking glass after glass of Burgundy.

And Nodier sat quietly, with averted eyes, trying in a fumbling manner to eat with his left hand, since his right hung useless in the sling.

The party lasted until two o'clock in the morning; then the guests were shown to their rooms, since Dumas insisted that the party would not be concluded until after a gargantuan breakfast the following morning.

Dumas retired alone to the keep, about two hundred yards from the chateau. This was a towerlike edifice, built on Gothic lines; the surrounding moat was spanned by a small bridge. Dumas crossed the bridge and entered the keep, locking the bolt-studded door behind him. The first floor consisted of a single room—Dumas' study—where he did his writing.

Dumas lit a candle, then climbed the circular staircase that led to his bedchamber upon the second floor. Before retiring, he opened a door, went out to a balcony which encircled the tower, and looked down upon the gardens.

All was still, and the moon rode low in the west. He felt vaguely uneasy. Had de Frontenac been right? Should he have given up the idea of the housewarming? The party had seemed eminently successful tonight, and yet . . .

How long he slept, Dumas did not know, but he awakened suddenly, dimly aware that a sound had disturbed him. Then it came again—a faint scratching from the door to the balcony, which he had locked.

Had one of his birds escaped from the aviary? Could it be Jugurtha, his pet vulture, loose again?

He rose, lit a candle, and unbolting the door, stepped out upon the balcony. The night seemed pitch-black, for the moon had set and a heavy haze hid the stars. He heard a scrape behind him, but before he could turn, the candle was dashed from his hand, extinguishing itself in its fall, and large hands seized his throat in an iron grip.

He was forced to his knees, and for what seemed a long time he struggled impotently. Then the sudden thought that he was actually dying sent a great strength surging through his barrel-like

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body, and he was able at last to pry the relentless hands from his throat and give a mighty shout.

A blow struck him to his knees again, but he encircled his assailant's leg with his great arms and held on as the man, frightened by the shouts Dumas continued to make, tried frantically to escape. Finally a blow from his attacker's foot struck Dumas upon the cheek and sent him reeling backwards, and Dumas heard the sound of running footsteps.

As he struggled to his feet he became aware of other cries from below, and he recognized the voices of Célèste and de Frontenac among others. He ran around the tower balcony and was just in time to see a dark shadow drop from a huge oak, whose branches overhung the balcony, and run into the shadows of the park.

"There he goes!" he shouted. But he knew that catching the intruder was hopeless—the others were on the opposite side of the tower, and the night was dark. He could hear someone pounding on the door below, and de Frontenac's voice shouting, "Alexandre—Alexandre—let us in!"

With a sigh he went down to unbolt the door.

Not more than a dozen guests had been aroused by Dumas' cries, but these crowded excitedly around the writer in the tower study. Rasconi had hastily built a fire, and when Dumas was finished, de Frontenac said, "It might be wise to visit the other guests at once—to see who looks exerted and perspiring."

"No," Dumas said firmly. "I was not hurt, and I will not disturb my friends with my suspicions."

The majordomo shook his head somberly.

"But this is not the only strange thing that has happened to-night, Monsieur."

"What do you mean, Rasconi?" Dumas asked.

"Before you called out—maybe an hour before—I heard another cry. In the chateau. I went into the hall to listen."

"A cry? Did it come from one of the bedrooms?"

"Oui, Monsieur, I believe it did."

"Whose?"

"Doctor Jazet's, I believe."

Doctor Jazet was the principal doctor of Saint-Germain. He had probably saved Dumas' life from food poisoning shortly after the writer settled in Seine-et-Oise, and Dumas had formed a close friendship with him.

As Rasconi mentioned the doctor's name, Dumas stood up, his face turning white, and de Frontenac asked the majordomo, "Did you go to Doctor Jazet to inquire if he was all right?"

"No, Monsieur. There was no further cry, so I went back to bed."

"Mon Dieu," Dumas said suddenly. "It just occurred to me that

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perhaps—Raoul, Rasconi, come with me!"

As Dumas crossed the tower bridge, the two others following, he broke into a run which he did not stop until he reached the second floor of the chateau, where he rapped upon the door of the doctor's bedroom. There was no reply.

"Pray God, it is not what I think," Dumas murmured, and pushed open the door.

A lamp was lit upon the table, and upon the bed lay Doctor Jazet, a balding, middle-aged man, fully dressed in a black suit—lying on his side, as in a sleeping position. But from where he stood, Dumas could see the curved handle of a hunting knife in his chest.

"I feared this," Dumas said.

"But how could you have expected it?" de Frontenac asked, and Dumas was startled by the note of suspicion in his friend's voice.

Before Dumas could answer, Rasconi moved closer to the bed and uttered a low cry.

"Look, Monsieur, there is a number written on the back of his coat—in chalk!"

Dumas leaped to his servant's side and stared open-mouthed at the numeral, which was written with extreme neatness and clarity. The novelist passed a shaking hand over his broad face and cried hoarsely, "A Roman numeral 'one' —it is worse than I thought. Come quickly!"

The master of the Chateau de Monte Cristo ran into the hall and to another bedroom on the same floor, the others following. This time Dumas did not bother to knock—he rushed inside.

A similar scene greeted him—the lighted candle upon the table, the figure of a man in a dark suit lying upon the bed, with a knife in his chest, and upon the back of his coat, in chalk, the Roman numeral, II.

As Dumas turned to run out of the room again, de Frontenac, glowering now like an enemy instead of a friend, closed the door and put his broad back against it.

"Now, Dumas, he said, "the man who lies dead is my bosom friend, my only confidant, the banker of Saint-Germain, Jean Maquier. Before you leave this room, you will please explain the meaning of this terrible tragedy."

Dumas hid his face in his hands. When he looked up at last, he had himself under firm control.

"Can't you see, Raoul—someone is trying to make it apppar I have really gone mad! That in my attempt to recreate the characters and atmosphere of *The Count of Monte Cristo,* I have gone to the lunatic length of killing my own guests! Don't you remember? At the party Doctor Jazet played the part of Baron Danglars, one of the enemies of the Count of Monte Cristo, whom the Count destroyed. Jean Maquier, on the bed there,

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took the part of Mondego, the second of the Count's enemies. There is still a third, André Cassin, who took the part of the Count's third enemy, de Villefort. I must go to his room."

Once again de Frontenac stopped Dumas.

"Are you sure, Dumas," he asked softly, "that someone did attack you on the tower tonight?"

"Why would I lie? Do *you* think I am mad?"

A deathly silence followed. At last de Frontenac moved aside and Dumas left the room, followed by Rasconi.

But André Cassin was not in his room. The bed had been slept in, and luggage lay open, but the occupant was gone.

"Look in the stalls, Rasconi," Dumas said. "See if Monsieur Cassin's horse is gone."

When the majordomo had departed, Dumas walked up and down the room, making wide gestures and uttering some of his thoughts aloud. Was it Cassin who had murdered the doctor and the banker? But no, Cassin certainly would not then run away and thus call attention to himself. If his horse were gone, it could mean only one thing: that Cassin had been the one who attacked Dumas upon the keep, and in fear of being exposed, had fled from the chateau.

Or did Cassin's body, marked number III, lie somewhere in the halls or in the garden?

Dumas prayed this might not be so. He must send for the police at once, and meanwhile he must consider the other deadly enemies under his roof, two men who would delight in seeing him branded a lunatic—Nodier and Vaigres.

A sound from the door attracted Dumas' attention. He looked up to see his favorite, the blonde actress Céleste Picaud. She came quickly to his side and knelt at his feet.

"Ah, Alex, my angel, Monsieur de Frontenac has told me what has happened. It is I who am to blame! It was I who first suggested the costume party."

"I fear the public will not believe that, Céleste. I will be that madman Dumas."

"M. de Frontenac has sent for the police," Céleste said.

Dumas felt a sudden stab of anger, and rising abruptly, he started pacing the room again.

"What right has he? That was my duty. It seems de Frontenac has turned against me rather suddenly. I wonder now—has he ever been my friend at all?"

"He is your friend," Céleste said gently. "I know, because we sat in the library after everyone had gone to bed, and he talked much about you. For hours. Until we heard you shout upon the tower."

"That was before we found the doctor and Maquier dead."

"No, he told me just now, in the hall, that he was sorry he spoke

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so hastily to you. He said he would make it clear to the police when they come that you had enemies under your roof who might have committed these crimes."

"It is well, then . . . Yes, Rasconi?"

The majordomo stood in the doorway, shaking his head.

"M. Cassin's Arabian black is gone."

"Bien! It was he who attacked me, then. He will probably go directly back to Paris. Well, I must waste no time before the police get here."

"What will you do?" Céleste asked.

"Find the murderer," Dumas said simply.

Julian Nodier seemed shocked, but no less hostile when Rasconi brought the editor to Dumas in Cassin's bedroom.

"I never thought you would go to these lengths, Dumas," he said, shaking his head.

"You really believe I am guilty of these murders, Nodier?"

"What else can one believe?"

"But, Nodier, if you're thoroughly convinced I am a madman, why do you not tremble before me? I might attack and slay you now!"

Nodier frowned, and his lips formed a stubborn line.

"Tell me one thing," Dumas urged. "Why do you hate me so?"

"I will not answer that, now or ever," the editor replied.

Dumas leaned over suddenly and grasping Nodier's right hand, the one that hung limply from the sling, squeezed it gently. The man cried out in genuine pain.

"You devil!" the editor cried, then went quickly out of the room.

Rasconi and Dumas had to go looking for Vaigres. They found the sculptor in the servants' quarters, chatting with the cook, who was already beginning to prepare the gargantuan breakfast. Viagres always got on well with the servant class—his own father had once been a steward for the Duke de Valois.

"Ah, I tremble at the thought that you suspect me," the hunchback said maliciously. "But perhaps I am safe. In your book the Count does not murder his helper, Jacopo."

"Don't tell me you choose to believe it, too."

The other held out his hands in an exaggerated manner.

"All one has to do is look around at this fantastic chateau, and think of the party last night, to see that the murders are all of a piece."

Dumas seized a butcher's axe from the meat block and thunked it angrily into the wood.

"Alors," he cried, "you will answer my questions, Vaigres!"

Fear crossed the sculptor's face.

"Can you give me one good reason why I should not think it was *you* who knifed my guests?"

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"It happens I can. I could not sleep last night, so I came down here where I played backgammon with Rasconi until we heard you shout from the tower. I did not leave him once—is that not so, Rasconi?"

The majordomo nodded solemnly at Dumas. "Just he and I, Monsieur, as he says."

"But you did not appear with the guests at the keep, Vaigres. Where did you go?"

"I lack a certain curiosity, Dumas, especially where the health of an enemy is concerned. For you see, your invitation did not sweeten my feelings towards you that much."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went upstairs and saw some of the others coming from their bedrooms in response to your cry."

"Whom did you see? Name one."

"With pleasure, Monsieur. I saw your good friend de Frontenac. He was coming out of a bedroom he shouldn't have been in."

"Whose room?"

The hunchback made a sudden dart to the door, his eye fixed upon the axe in the meat block.

"Whose room?" Dumas thundered.

"Céleste Picaud's, Monsieur."

Dumas marched Vaigres at once to de Frontenac, who was striding up and down the vestibule, waiting for the police. At the sight of the sculptor, de Frontenac gave a shudder of distaste, and looked askance at Dumas.

"Tell Raoul the story you told me," Dumas demanded of Vaigres.

The sculptor wet his lips, then repeated the story hesitantly.

"The man is a liar," de Frontenac said quietly. "There is nothing between Mlle. Céleste and me except friendship."

"Of course I would expect you to say that," Dumas said.

"Believe me, Alexandre," de Frontenac said earnestly. "I have only one desire, and that is to serve as your friend. It is true, the shock of seeing Maquier dead swayed my judgement for a moment. But I can see clearly now that you are being persecuted. It is my intent to tell that to the police when they arrive."

At that very moment there was the crunch of carriage wheels in the driveway. At the sound, Dumas ran out through the rear of the chateau and down the garden path to his keep. Barring his door behind him, he flung himself into a leather arm-chair at his writing desk and put his head upon his arms. Panic gripped him, and with it a fear of seeing others until he had everything ordered in his mind.

Who had set the stage to make him look like a madman? Cassin—his former collaborator, who had run away? Nodier—who had an inexplicable hatred against

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him, and who had lied about de Frontenac?

Dumas seized a pen and began writing—his thoughts always arranged themselves when he wrote. Carefully he compared a full account of everything that had happened since his visit to Nodier's office the week before. He told of the duel, his talks with de Frontenac and Vaigres, his letter to Cassin in Paris—of all the events preceding the discovery of the two murders, and of all that took place afterwards.

Several times, during the hours he wrote, there came knocks upon the door, but he shouted the intruders away.

It was mid-morning when he completed the detailed account. He was aware with one part of his mind that someone was pounding on his door again, but he paid no attention. He heard too the murmur of voices and the thundering of a battering ram. He read his manuscript faster and faster, and when the door burst open and the Inspector and several policemen entered, Dumas put the last sheet of paper down upon the desk and looked up with an air of triumph.

"You are just in time," Dumas announced. "I now know the murderer!"

Dumas stood in the center of the Arabian Room in the chateau, whence he had been led by the Inspector and the policemen. His guests, looking pale and haggard in the morning light, stood sullenly around the room. Inspector Dubois, a brisk intelligent young man, nodded at Dumas.

"You may speak, Monsieur Dumas, but if you offer no satisfactory explanation, I will have to ask you to accompany me to Saint-Germain."

Dumas nodded and looked at Nodier.

"I shall waste no time, then. I believed from the first that one of my enemies who attended the party last night was guilty of these murders. There were three only—Nodier, Cassin, and Vaigres. I felt also that the murderer's intent was to make me seem a madman in the eyes of the world. This I now know to be true.

"First, André Cassin. It was he who attacked me upon the balcony of the keep, and then fled, probably back to Paris. He had lost a suit against me, and it was a mortal wound to his pride for which he will never forgive me But he was not interested in making me seem a madman. He was intent upon killing *me*—and that meant that he would have had no reason for murdering Doctor Jazet and Jean Maquier as well.

"Then there was Nodier. In our duel I shot him through the right shoulder, so he could not use his right hand at all. I know this because when I grasped it he cried out with pain. Also, he was clumsy

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with his left hand—I saw how difficult it was for him to use his fork last night. But the Roman numerals printed in chalk on the back of the dead men were firmly executed—by someone in full control of his hands. Therefore, Nodier did not murder the doctor or Maquier.

"And now, Vaigres—"

"I have done nothing!" the sculptor cried shrilly. "You are the madman, not I!"

"Neither of us is a madman, Vaigres. You said you played backgammon with Rasconi all during the early hours of the morning. I believe you, because I have for many years trusted Rasconi completely, and I know he would not lie to me."

The Inspector cleared his throat. "But if these three enemies of yours did not commit murder, Monsieur Dumas, who did?"

"There is only one other—Raoul de Frontenac. He is not my enemy in the sense that the others were—but he *did* have reason for killing Doctor Jazet and Jean Maquier."

M. de Frontenac was too stunned at first to speak; then he leaped to his feet, his handsome features congested with rage.

"I have tried not to believe the truth, that this man is mad, but this accusation proves it. Why should I wish to fasten crimes upon Monsieur Dumas, if, as he himself admits, I am not his enemy?"

"Do you wish that question answered here, in front of everybody?" Dumas asked quietly.

De Frontenac turned an icy look upon the novelist.

"You have no answer to that and you know it," he said stiffly at last.

"I have an answer," Dumas replied. "An answer so incredible that if I uttered it, I would appear truly bereft of my senses. So I shall put it this way: the answer to why Raoul de Frontenac killed two men here in the Chateau de Monte Cristo, lies in the mausoleum within the crypt marked 'Aimée' . . ."

De Frontenac stood like a pillar of ice.

Dumas said softly, "And if Raoul denies you the right to look into that crypt, Inspector, it means I am right!"

"Can't you see the man is mad?" de Frontenac said, but the confidence had gone out of his voice.

"Will you tell us what lies within the crypt, Monsieur?" the Inspector asked, impressed.

"No, never will I do that!"

"Then in view of M. Dumas' accusation, will you give us permission to look for ourselves?"

De Frontenac lowered his eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

"I can scarcely refuse."

The mausoleum rang hollowly under the boots of two policemen

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as the Inspector, Dumas, and Raoul de Frontenac waited silently outside in the harsh noon sunshine. De Frontenac stood like a man awaiting his turn at the guillotine, his eyes fixed upon the marble angels which hovered over the corners of the vault.

There came the ringing sound of metal and the grind of stone, at which de Frontenac started and stared wildly about him.

"I am sorry, Raoul," Dumas murmured softly. "There is still time. Will you tell us? Then there will be no need—"

"This is an unpleasant thing for all of us," Inspector Dubois added.

From inside came another ringing blow and the sound of a heavy slab being let down upon the tiles.

"We have the crypt open, Inspector," a policeman called out.

"No, *no!*" de Frontenac screamed, as if he'd lost his mind. The next instant he ran down the hill to the gate of the cemetery.

Another policeman tried to stop de Frontenac, but before he could lay hands upon him, de Frontenac backed away, pulled a knife out of his pocket, and with a frantic upraising of the arm plunged the blade deep into his own chest. He fell upon the ground and was dead before the policeman reached him . . .

"It was the child buried with the mother, Aimée, that de Frontenac feared the world might learn about," Dumas said to Julian Nodier the following day when the editor came to the chateau seeking Dumas' explanation of the mystery.

"You see," continued Dumas, "there *was* a madman in all this, but it was de Frontenac. When I read through the description of him that I wrote in the keep, I realized he *must* be mad. Only a madman would have a fresco in his garden glorifying the physical perfection of himself and his sons!

"Nor could he even stand the *sight* of deformity. He refused to go up to the mausoleum when Vaigres was working there because the sight of the hunchback revolted him. I remembered his expression when he told me to go up alone that day, and I recall his same look when I confronted him with Vaigres here at the chateau. Also, I noticed that although Aimée had died in childbirth, and the baby at the same time, only her name was carved upon the crypt. Where was the baby buried? Doubtless with the mother, as is the custom. *Then why was the child's name not carved also?*

"Obviously because de Frontenac had rejected the child. Was it because the child had been the cause of the mother's death? No, de Frontenac had been indifferent to Aimée.

"It could only be because de Frontenac must have been mortally ashamed of the child. Why?

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Because, as I surmised and it was proved when the crypt was opened—the baby had been born malformed! Rather than have the world ever learn that he, the perfect sire of a perfect line, could father such a child, he was willing to commit murder to prevent any possible disclosure. Doctor Jazet, de Frontenac's physician, naturally delivered the child and would know of its imperfection. Maquier, too, must have known, because de Frontenac said himself that Maquier was his only confidant.

"But de Frontenac was afraid to take the lives of two men so closely associated with him—he would be the obvious suspect. So when the rumor was circulated in Saint-Germain that I, his friend, was mad, he conceived the idea of connecting their deaths with me. The fact that Céleste was his mistress and de Frontenac was a subtly persuasive man—did he not persuade me to continue with my plans of the party by suggesting first that I give them up?—made the whole plan possible. Céleste came to me with the idea in the first place, and it was she, under de Frontenac's influence, who cast the guests in their various parts . . ."

As Dumas finished, his cat Mysouf jumped upon his lap, and he stroked the animal very gently.

Nodier spoke admiringly. "You are a great man, Alexandre Dumas, and I have judged you wrongly. Your mind illumines all things. However, there is perhaps one point you have wondered about—the reason for my hostility against you."

"Not at all," Dumas said calmly. "I received a letter this morning in answer to one I sent last week to the Prefect of Police in Paris, who is my friend. He told me your real name is Antoine Allut, and that you are the son of the man upon whom I based my character of de Villefort in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Oh, yes, I admit I found the whole story in the police files, and used it as the basis of the plot for my novel. Most of it happened in real life, just as I told it. And, of course, since you are the son of the man to whom it happened, and your father, I understand, unfortunately died in poverty, you were naturally resentful that I should capitalize so successfully upon his life story. Is this not so?"

"It was," Nodier said, "but no longer."

The printer held out his free hand and Dumas grasped it.

"Thank you, Nodier. When one has lost a friend, it is good to gain a new one immediately!"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: JOHN DENVER

TITLE: *Too Late for Dreams*

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Mark Hagerty

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was Detective Hagerty's first out-of-town assignment—to bring back a man—a man to be electrocuted . . .*

WHEN TOMMY PRESCOTT WAS eleven years old, he wanted to do something spectacular, something to impress the block. So he threw a brick through a pawnshop window and stole a revolver.

The crime was never solved, but neither did the gun do any damage. Tommy pushed it under the noses of a few awed friends, wove some blustery daydreams around it and then—fearful of punishment—threw it into the river.

When he was fourteen, he hit his manual-training teacher with a wrench when the latter told him he was ripping the threads off a bolt by forcing the nut.

The principal of Public School 19—wanting no unpleasant publicity—delivered Tommy to his father with a stern warning. The father took two quick drinks while pondering various forms of chastisement. This set him off on a three-day bender, and when he sobered up, he couldn't remember why he'd taken the two drinks in the first place. So the incident was forgotten by all save the teacher, who paid out $56 for new bridgework.

These were but two milestones in a progression that brought Tommy—in his twenty-fourth year—to a point at which he totaled up all the wrongs done him by his shop foreman, lured the man to a quiet place behind the lockers, and killed

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him with a switchbladed knife.

The stupidity of the murder was contrasted, two weeks later, with the brilliance with which Tommy escaped from the 23rd Precinct Station, where he was being held because of overcrowded conditions in City Hall Jail. Tommy walked casually out the front door, mistaken for the clerk of a bondsman who had offices down the street.

This embarrassed the station, but fortunately Tommy reverted to his normal stupidity and got picked up four days later in a small town 250 miles away. Afraid to enter taverns because of sharp-eyed barkeeps, he asked a policeman where the nearest public comfort station was. It turned out to be right next to the jail, two blocks away.

Homicide Detective Mark Hagerty, working out of the 23rd Precinct Station, reported at eight o'clock and was called into Captain Swigart's office. Swigart, sixty and grizzled, peered through his fog of harassment and said, "Ben Murphy's down with the grippe."

This left Mark Hagerty without a partner. He said, "Ben wasn't feeling very good yesterday."

"Well, he feels a lot worse now, so you take a run upstate and bring Prescott back. That'll kill your day."

Swigart might have been implying he didn't want a rookie homicide man messing around town without the guidance of an old hand like Ben Murphy. But then again, bringing Tommy Prescott back was not an unimportant assignment.

"This is your first out-of-town."

Few men ever got one. Perhaps that made him lucky. "Yes, sir," Mark said.

"Okay. Keep it down to a reasonable three meals, and tip light. They're on my back for incidentals."

The escape, probably, Mark thought. The people at the Hall had childish ways of showing displeasure—such as questioning petty expenditures. There was method, though. Put a captain on the defensive, and complaints about an understaffed, overworked station sounded like alibis.

"Myers is on the desk," Swigart said. "He's setting it up for you . . ."

Myers had the kind of flat, expressionless voice that would have qualified him as a guide on a sightseeing bus. He said, "You get a break going up. Elkins Falls is five miles from Walton, where a Trans-Eastern local sets down. It'll put you there in an hour and a half, and a bus'll haul you to Elkins Falls. The plane leaves here at ten forty."

Mark looked at his watch. "That gives me two hours." He would call home from the pay 'phone in the corridor and maybe again from the airport.

"Coming back's not so good," Myers went on. "No plane until tomorrow, so you ride a milk train

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out of Elkins Falls. Leaves there at three ten. The run back takes about five hours."

"That won't be too bad."

Myers voiced no opinion as to whether it would or would not. "Here are your papers. I made the expense voucher for fifty. Take it to Room 601 at the Hall for the cash."

Myers' voice dropped to a lower monotone. "Slip the Elkins Falls turnkey five bucks. It's the custom. But cover it up in your expense report. You make that out when you get back. And turn in the dough you don't use with the report."

Mark shoved the papers into his pocket. "Too bad Prescott put the city to all this expense."

Myers was studying a photo on the back of the Trans-Eastern timetable, which showed a swimming pool in the heart of a Canadian forest, with a leggy beauty waving to someone out of sight. "Very funny. You meant it for a funny, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did."

"Either way, you're right. Good luck . . ."

Vivian's voice came bright and excited over the 'phone—the way it always did.

Mark said, "They're sending me on a trip, hon."

"No! Where to, darling?"

"Upstate—a place called Elkins Falls."

"Why, that's where they caught that—"

"I'm going to bring him back. Ben's down with the grippe and they don't want me clowning things up."

"That's silly! Bringing a prisoner back is an important job."

"Sure it is. I'll be home around ten tonight. Keep the ham bone hot."

"No allowance for wives, I suppose?"

"Not a thin dime."

"I'll call Mary and see how Ben is."

"Do that."

"And, darling—be careful!"

"Of course. You don't think I'm the biggest coward on the force for nothing, do you?"

Mark turned the 'phone over to a woman whose tragic eyes reflected the sins of some loved one. He went to the garage and caught a ride to the Hall in an outgoing prowl car. The clerk in Room 601 cashed the voucher as though the funds came from his own savings account.

Back in the street, Mark paused on the Hall steps to watch the trucks jammed up at both visible intersections. Switched off his regular routine, he found himself in an odd, almost whimsical mood. *Deliveries,* he thought. *We're all messenger boys. Everybody rushing around moving something from here to there. Fetching and carrying. Food to be eaten. Clothing to be worn. Papers to be filed. Gadgets to be used.*

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A man to be electrocuted.

Mark crossed to the curb and got into a cab. *Suppose I collared the next man I pass? Would he be so much different from the one I'm going after?*

He scowled. What was he trying to prove? That criminals should be coddled? That Mark Hagerty shouldn't be a cop? No. This last didn't add up any more than the first. He'd done his share of thinking about what makes a criminal, and not with any sense of being special. He was sure that every man who entered the field did the same thing.

The cab stopped. Mark paid the driver and was tempted to ask for a receipt, but didn't.

The plane took off at exactly ten forty. A pretty hostess served coffee, and the attractive brunette who sat beside Mark rubbed her leg against his without demanding any great attention in return. All in all, it was a very pleasant trip, although the five-mile bus ride was the roughest Mark could remember . . .

Elkins Falls was a neat, clean little town. It was supported by a flourishing plastics factory. The cops wore smart, light-blue uniforms as though they appreciated the privilege, and the two squad cars Mark saw were as shiny as new quarters.

Mark introduced himself to a ridiculously young desk sergeant who took the transfer form and shook his head with what seemed like a touch of sadness. "Too bad—just too damn bad."

"What's too bad?"

The sergeant said, "Your boy's out here."

He got up and led Mark through a spotless corridor to a big bull pen holding seven prisoners. None of them moved so much as an eyelash. Six held their attention glued to a seventh, who was sprawled in one corner playing a harmonica. His eyes were closed. The melody was nameless, almost formless, but to Mark it symbolized the yearning of all the frustrated from the beginning of time. It wasn't something you had to listen to, that you had to be convinced of. It was just there—its own authority for being.

A chill danced down Mark's spine, bringing him back to reality. "I didn't know he was a musician."

"Somebody else had the harmonica. He borrowed it. They won't let him quit. I don't get any work done for listening."

"I guess he'll have to quit now."

"As I said—it's too bad. He hasn't been any trouble. We kind of hate to see him go."

"He cut a man's throat."

"Yeah, we know. He hasn't been any trouble. Kind of surprising when you think of it."

The turnkey opened the door and Tommy Prescott came out. He was six feet, slim, and limped on a shortened right leg. Mark remembered now that Tommy Prescott's father had shoved him off the back porch

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when he was seven. Or, at least, that was Tommy's story.

Prescott followed the sergeant back out front, moving under no form of restraint. Mark did not object. This prisoner, as yet, did not belong to him.

They stood side by side as the sergeant rounded the desk, took a pad of receipt forms from a drawer, and began writing. Mark sized up his prisoner. Tommy Prescott was smiling slightly. There was a dreamy look in his eyes.

"They sure liked me here. Yeah, they sure did. I played for 'em and they couldn't get enough of that little old harmonica."

"Sign here," the sergeant said.

Mark picked up the pad, wrote on it, and tore off the receipt. Then he brought out the handcuffs and clamped one around Prescott's right wrist.

As he snapped the other to his own left wrist, he saw Prescott's features—saw icy blueness wash away the dreamy light, saw the smile twist and remold into raw, deadly hatred.

Prescott raised his head and looked Mark full in the face.

"Damn you to hell," he muttered. "Damn you all to hell!" But Mark read more in the unspoken thoughts of the youth who had hated an unsuspecting foreman to the point of jamming a knife into his throat: *I'll get away from you. I'll find some way to kill you dead and I'll get away and run. I ain't going back, mister. Ain't going back to die.*

And in Mark's mind was the weird conviction that here was not one man, but two . . .

The train consisted of a diesel and four milk tanks, with a decrepit passenger car hanging on behind as though it had been added as an afterthought.

There were four passengers besides Mark and his prisoner. Mark chose a double seat in the far rear and snapped his half of the cuff to a steel pipe under the window. He sat down facing Prescott, and the car creaked in weariness as the train pulled out of Elkins Falls.

"Sit back and relax. We've got five hours ahead of us."

"How do I go to the can?"

"Just ask. We'll arrange it."

The train got up speed quickly. Lush dairyland whirled by, and then they moved into forested country. The conductor came from somewhere up front and instantly spotted the handcuffs. A perky little oldster, he studied Tommy Prescott with the bright interest of a sparrow. "Taking one in, huh?"

Mark extended the tickets. "All the way through."

"We had us one a year or so back. Kilt a man down in Mississippi, I think it was. They sent two cops after him." He punched the tickets and stuck two seat tabs in the holder on Mark's side. "He was a bad one, all right. What did this one do?"

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"He's my younger brother," Mark said. "He gets lost."

Such bits were very funny on TV, but the line fell flat here, and Mark wished he hadn't wisecracked.

"No offense. No offense, mister." The conductor took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He held it toward Tommy. "You want a smoke, son?"

Tommy Prescott's face was expressionless. His lips hardly moved as he said, "Get away from me, or I'll chop you in pieces!"

The conductor's hand jerked back. He turned and bustled up the aisle. After a time, he came back and switched on the overhead lights. They gave out a dim, yellow glare that added the last perfect touch of bleakness to the creaking, pitching car.

"He had it coming," Tommy said.

Mark blinked and straightened, taking his eyes off the hypnotic sweep of the dusky landscape outside. "Just thoughtless."

"I mean Epperson. He had it in for me. Rode me. What the hell do you do about a guy that rides you?"

Mark studied Tommy Prescott thoughtfully. "You don't necessarily cut his throat."

Prescott's fist doubled. Taut muscles jerked the cuff against the pipe. "Anybody shoves me around gets it! They get it good! Who the hell they think they are? Who the hell did Epperson think he was?"

"Why didn't you think it over? If you'd given yourself time to cool down—"

"He asked for it!"

The train ground to a stop against red-hot brake shoes. In the momentary dead silence the croaking of frogs could be heard from the quiet country outside.

"You play a nice harmonica," Mark said. "Ever study music?"

Tommy Prescott's scowl held steady. "I gotta go to the can."

Mark slid the revolver out of his shoulder holster and pushed it into his right hip pocket. He unlocked the cuff and gripped it tight in his left hand. He said, "Okay. It's up front. You walk ahead . . ."

The trip wasn't as tiresome as Mark had anticipated. The stops were few and the claptrap condition of the car gave an illusion of speed.

When the train pulled into the terminal, Prescott was asleep. Mark transferred the pipe end of the cuffs to his own wrist and sat for a moment studying his prisoner. "Wake up, Tommy. We're here."

Prescott opened his eyes. His face was pale. His mouth was tight and worn. The eyes that had been dreamy and deadly in turn were now heavy and bloodshot. Prescott looked around. "We in?"

"End of the line."

A change came over Prescott—a change Mark thought he understood. From Elkins Falls to the city, Tommy Prescott had main-

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tained the illusion that everything would be all right. He had always changed unpleasant situations. At fourteen, he'd changed one with a wrench. He'd changed another at the factory with a knife. He had confidently expected to change this one, but here they were and it was late, too late for dreams—only enough time left to face reality at last.

As they stepped onto the platform, Mark sensed the shiver that ran through Prescott's body, heard the muttered words from the hangdog lips: "I'm scared, copper. Honest to God—I'm scared sick."

He knows he's through, Mark thought. *It must be a hell of a feeling, from where he stands . . .*

Mark detailed his expenses over a cup of coffee after he got home. He checked the list against the cash he had left, snapped off the television set, and went into the bedroom where Vivian was slipping out of her dress.

"Thirty-two dollars and sixty cents," he said. "The city got a bargain. Three for the price of one."

Vivian reached for the hem of her slip. "What are you talking about?"

He walked over and picked up Vivian's hairbrush and ran a finger over the bristles. There *had* been three. A dreamy-eyed musician. A cold-hearted killer. A beaten youth, sick-scared and quaking on the train platform in the shadow of the electric chair.

He'd seen them all.

They sent for the one in the middle, he thought, *but they got all three.* They would electrocute the killer, but the other two would die with him at no extra charge.

Mark turned suddenly to Vivian. "Do you think I'm a good cop, honey?"

"Of course you are, Mark. What made you ask that?"

"I don't know. Maybe I think too much."

Vivian came close to him. "The day you stop thinking, darling—that's when I'll worry."

She was soft and warm, and as he held her, he pushed from his mind the memory of a dim, yellow light glaring down on Tommy Prescott's face.

He kissed Vivian. "Let's go to bed."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Number 19 in our new series of "first stories" . . . A "charming" tale (note the quotes) of two young matrons of suburbia and a man of the world deliberately eavesdropping—or, to put it another way, of two females of the species (than whom, it has been said, there are none deadlier) and a male of great and varied experience who thought he could not be easily shocked . . .

The author spent one year in WAAC in Iowa, then got a "fascinating" job in personnel in OWI. She was assigned to North Africa and Italy, and later was transferred to the War Department in Austria. She married a handsome Field Artillery officer who had been through the Battle of the Bulge and who is now a vice-president of a pyrochemical firm in New York City. They have two children, a girl and a boy, both in Junior High. Mrs. Smith's hobbies include reading, writing, and cooking.

We quote from the author's letter: "I've worked on the PTA, Girl Scouts, put on numerous programs for the League of Women Voters and local clubs, decorated innumerable booths, helped arrange covered-dish suppers—and done most of the things women do all over the United States."

So, housewives and mothers everywhere: if you have the yen to write, here is proof that it can be done!

AFFAIR OF THE MIND

by BETH SMITH

THE CAFE PRATER ADVERTISES itself as the only Viennese café in Westchester, which is probably an exaggeration. To Petru Panescu, late of Austria, Rumania, and several other countries he did not care to name, it had a certain nostalgic charm. After the terrors of Bucharest, it had been a good life in Vienna working for the American Army—until he had been caught selling information to the Russians. The information had been most inaccurate, but the police had not been impressed.

As a matter of fact, it had been time he left the city of a million lights—the Countess had been more than annoyed about the little ballet dancer. Ah, women could be a problem—almost as much as money. He sighed. If only his passport

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had not been so expensive. A marvelous forgery, but so very expensive! It had taken all the money he had managed to divert from the Countess *and* the Commissar's wife in Bucharest.

Well now, he must put all that behind him. He was in New York, a city of countless opportunities, and once he was established, things would pick up. He smoothed his blond hair back and straightened the broad shoulders under the cashmere jacket. Actually, he had not done too badly so far. The commissions on the two MGs he had sold were not much, and, of course, thanks to that stupid woman he had lost a third, but he had made some good contacts.

At the thought of the stupid woman, he grimaced and poured a glass of the Liebfraumilch from the bottle on the table. Everything had been so charming up until the time he had discovered she was not really interested in a sports car, but in the salesman. How could she ever think of marriage? Had he given her even one shred of hope? One hint even? Well, perhaps a slight hint, but any really worldly woman, especially one with her less-than-adequate bank account, would have taken it as all part of the game. These American women were so very naive. Hmmm. Maybe naive was not quite the word. She had shown a remarkably sophisticated turn of phrase when she told him to leave.

Hastily he poured himself another glass of wine and looked about him. Yes, it was all quite delightful and he was fortunate he had stopped here to recover his poise on the way back from that near-disaster. Even in the candle-lit dimness of this late autumn afternoon he could see that the murals were not of the best, but one could readily recognize the Rathaus, St. Stephen's, and, of course, the Prater with the Riesenrad towering over everything. What was that foolish name they gave it here? —ah, yes, Ferris wheel.

He leaned back against the wall (he always sat with his back to the wall—it was a habit he had picked up early in life when the Germans were in Bucharest) and hummed to the music that rolled lazily through the café. He couldn't place the tune, but undoubtedly it was one of those innumerable waltzes by Strauss.

There was a small flurry at the door and he saw a tall slim woman with smooth dark hair, talking to the waiter. The waiter looked about the empty café and shrugged the ineffable shrug of waiters all over the world. Just then another flurry announced a second woman, small, with short tangled hair, and a laugh that carried to Petru. The two women greeted each other affectionately and turned to the waiter. As he led them toward Petru, the European in him began to appraise them automatically.

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The tall one had a silver-colored fur stole over a black dress, while the short, bland-faced one had a dark stole over what looked like an identical black dress. From his brief stay in this country he had already gathered that this was almost a uniform worn by practically all women. This was going to be a future problem for him. The women all seemed to dress well on practically no money and he would have to find a means of arriving at the status of the purse other than by clothing. Jewelry was something else. Diamonds are diamonds, and Petru was an expert in appraising the value of precious stones.

The waiter led the two women past Petru's table and seated them in an alcove behind him. He caught a wave of scent as they passed and suddenly he realized what the song was that he had been humming—*Wine, Women, and Song*. Really now, this was almost prophetic.

As he poured another glass of wine, he heard a low emphatic voice order a vodka martini and then a light, rather breathless voice request a Planter's punch. The vodka voice asked in amusement, "Planter's punch?"

The other said, "Yes, I need something strong. I'm just not getting any place."

"Well, don't let it get you down," said Madame Vodka. "We'll figure something out. After all, I've been through this before, and it isn't hard once you put your mind to it."

The light voice said, "But I've put my mind to it and it doesn't seem to do much good."

Petru caught a tinge of desperation in the voice and wondered what reason she had to be so desperate. Really women were quite impossible with their petty concerns which they always magnified to such immense proportions.

Now what could her problem be? An overdrawn checking account? An impulsive but much too expensive purchase? In spite of himself, he was becoming interested. He raised his head and received a small shock. A pale sad face seemed to be swimming in front of his eyes.

He closed his eyes quickly, and when he opened them things came into focus. He was facing the murals, yes, but they were interspersed with panels of mirrors so that he could see some of the other tables. The face he stared at was that of the light-voiced woman who had ordered the rum drink, and as his eyes became accustomed to the illusion, he could see the profile of the other woman, partially hidden by a face veil. It was a rather charming effect—two faces floating in darkness, like masks in a Greek tragedy.

The one facing him had been sipping her drink pensively and now she spoke again. "If I didn't have such a short time, I might be able to think it out clearly, but with everything piling on top of

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me, I can't think of a foolproof scheme. And it has to be foolproof, otherwise . . ." She ran her hand across her throat in an abrupt gesture.

Petru was intrigued by now, and his thoughts raced. Now what would make her so desperate? Somehow it didn't sound like money . . . Ah, ha! He had it! It must be the affair of the heart. Now he was on familiar ground. She had become enamored of another man, but a jealous husband was making a rendezvous difficult to arrange. How well Petru knew that type of husband! Yes, the wife would have to find a foolproof scheme or everything could become quite unpleasant. This then was the purpose of the meeting with her friend —one who had, in her own words, been through this before. From this one she would get expert advice in intrigue.

Ah, these sly, sly women—adorable, yes, but so sly. It was the same no matter where he went—Bucharest, Vienna, New York: they were all sisters under the skin whether they were the wives of the Russian secret police or American business tycoons. And then they wondered why he refused to get married. Affairs of the heart?—yes. Marriage? Heaven forbid!

Satisfied, he went back to viewing his little tragedy turned comedy. He heard the one in profile say, "But, Laura, all you have to do is be efficient about it. Here take this old envelope and pencil and make a list of everything you should do."

Petru almost laughed aloud. These Americans were priceless! Even their assignations were set up like a campaign to be followed step by step. Just at that moment he caught the eyes of Laura (such a romantic name) and gravely he raised his wine glass to her and drank. She looked startled, dropped her lashes, and turned to her companion.

Petru was aware that the music had started again. Now what was *that* little piece exactly? Ah, yes, he had it now: something deliciously appropriate—the waltz from the Rosenkavalier that was so sensuous it really had no right to be a waltz.

He shifted a little closer and the voice of the little Laura rose above the music. "Well, all right, Mag, if you say so—but you know, murdering a husband isn't the easiest thing in the world!"

The rosy romantic world of Petru Panescu collapsed slowly before his disbelieving eyes. What incredible thing was this? Had he heard right? Murder? Was *this* what they were planning?

In a daze he heard the low-voiced Mag say firmly, "But all you have to do is think of it in terms of an accident. Look, let's go over what you told me on the phone. First, he's found out about the gambling and the other man, right? Also, he's got evidence and

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if he sues for divorce there isn't a leg to stand on—no alimony, no house, no nothing. But if he dies before he has a chance to do anything, then it's all gravy. Remember though, it has to look like an accident. Now, you've got to figure out the time, the place, and how you're going to do it—without a slip-up."

Petru poured another drink and gulped it down. He found his hand shaking. He forced himself to look up into the mirror again. As before, he met the eyes of Laura but this time it was he who looked away.

He heard her say, "But that's just it. I can figure ways of doing it, all right, but I always leave loopholes anyone could see through."

"What exactly have you thought of?" asked Mag.

"Well, there's poison—put poison in some hot chili and he'd never know."

Petru watched in fascination as Mag contemplated the idea.

"No!" she said at last, "where would you get the poison and how could you possibly make it look like an accident? Too risky."

Petru brought out his handkerchief and passed it over his face and head, for once not caring that he was disturbing his careful elegance.

"What I liked about the way you got rid of yours," said Laura, "was that it was so natural. Who'd think you could tamper with a jar of green beans until it was ridden with botulinus bacteria—especially green beans canned by his own mother! That was terribly clever."

Mag laughed, a throaty laugh that made Petru wince. "Now that's what you need. It should be something natural like mine—something that happens in your daily life." She took a sip of her vodka. "Wait, I'm beginning to get an idea. Something with a car. For instance, everyone knows you can't drive, but your husband asks you to come to the garage so that he can check something. He wants the car eased forward a little, and then the brake put on. Instead of the brake, you press down hard on the accelerator. The car leaps forward and he's pinned against the garage wall. Poof . . . goodbye, husband."

Laura protested immediately. "Oh, I couldn't go for anything that bloody." She thought for a moment. "But that gives me an idea . . . the business with the car. Say that he came home too drunk to make it out of the garage and if he stayed there all night with the motor running, the gas would kill him."

"Good," said Mag. "But remember, you need an alibi. Suppose you arrange to have someone come to the house to sell something. Insurance. No, he'd have to stay in the house."

"What about a car salesman?" Laura asked.

Petru stiffened.

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"Perfect!" said Mag. "Look, I think I've got it. You feed him stiff drinks from the time he comes home up until around eight o'clock. Put sleeping pills in them and then get him down to the garage. Have him stay down there in the car until he falls asleep. Then set out some oil cans and rags and tools—this way it'll look as if he'd been trying to fix the motor. Start the motor, close all the doors tight, and go upstairs and wait. When the salesman comes, you go out with him for the demonstration. Just as you're going out the door say something like, don't worry, dear, I'll let you know if I like the new model and you won't have to knock yourself out on that old wreck downstairs."

Laura took up the tale excitedly. "Then all I have to do is turn on the old charm and keep the salesman out as my alibi until it's too late for anyone to do anything. Oh, Maggie, I think that's terrific!"

Maggie smiled and Petru's blood ran cold. Never, never had he met women like this—not even the wives of the secret police had been like this!

He heard Laura call to the waiter for fresh drinks and again their eyes met in the mirror. To his horror she seemed about to speak to him. Petru almost screamed to himself. "She knows somehow I am a car salesman! I will be the one she will choose to be the—what did they call it?—the alibi."

At that he lunged up in one of the few ungraceful moves he had made in his entire life, and as the waiter hurried to him Petru flung a bill at him and ran out the door.

The Café Prater was quiet once more, except for the music in the background. "What do you suppose got into that man who was sitting there?" asked Laura.

"Probably realized he had to catch a train," said Mag. "Well, now that you've got your murder all mapped out, does it seem so hopeless?"

"No," said Laura slowly, "it's a lot easier when you know how. But you know, Mag, I don't think I can ever get used to the idea of killing. I just can't be casual about it the way you are."

"Let's face it," said Maggie, "you either have larceny in your heart, or you have butter. You happen to have butter. Speaking of larceny, were you flirting with that man in the mirror? You kept watching him all the while he was here."

"I know," said Laura, "I was thinking about last week's creative writing class. You know how Ellery Queen is always telling us to keep looking around for characters to use in our stories? Well, I kept watching this one as we were talking and I was casting him in my story."

"Oh," said Mag, "as the car salesman?"

"Heavens, no," said Laura, "as the husband!"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Number 20 in our new series of "first stories" . . . A character study, in depth, and in some ways a remarkable "first story"—at least, one we do not think you are likely to forget in a hurry.

The author was born in Brooklyn in 1930, and started her first short story at the age of 9. It was the tragic tale of a young boy trapped in a sinking submarine; but since the author could not figure out how the world would ever learn of her hero's fate, she never finished the story.

Mrs. Sackheim was graduated from Hunter College in 1951, a journalism major. She worked in advertising agencies for six years, and is now married to an advertising executive. They have two boys, both too young for school, and at the time of this writing are expecting a third child very soon.

We quote from the author's letter: "As a housewife and mother, I spend most of the time cooking, cleaning, and changing diapers."

So we repeat: housewives and mothers everywhere, if you have the desire to write, here is more proof that it can be done!

THE MAGIC POWER

by PAULA SACKHEIM

CHARLIE HARMON WALKED QUICKly through the long corridor leading to the inner offices, hoping he would get there before the girls in the Bookkeeping department came in. Charlie hated passing through that department to his own little cubicle in Shipping. Those giggling girls and their sideward looks made him feel sick to his stomach, especially since the day, a couple of weeks ago, when he had asked the new girl, Alice, for a date. If only she had not laughed at him.

She was such a sneak, too. Right away she had told the three other girls, Agnes, Vera, and Francine. Since then, each day had been agony for Charlie.

"Oh, what a lover!" one of them would snicker as he passed. He never dared look and see which one of them had said it, but he was sure it was Alice. Boy, did he hate her! If only there was some way to get even with her. Maybe cut off that phony blonde pony-tail she went flicking around as if she was Mrs. Astor's pet horse.

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As he got to Bookkeeping he heard the typewriters. Boy, no matter how early he got there, someone always beat him. Probably planned it that way to watch him coming in and talk about him the rest of the day.

Charlie stopped for a moment outside the closed door. Should he tiptoe in and see if he could pass them without being seen? No, they'd probably spot him and laugh even harder.

Eyes straight ahead, shoulders back, he walked through quickly and purposefully, without faltering for one second.

"Good morning, girls, lot of work today," he said, trying to sound very much in a hurry.

"Listen to lover boy." He heard the titter behind him. "A regular vice-president."

He finally reached the shipping office. As usual, the place was loaded down with orders that had to go out "first thing." Frank, his boss, wasn't there yet and Charlie wondered if he should start without him.

Hell, Frank would probably yell and say, "You did it wrong, as usual, Charlie," and check everything anyhow. He sat down on a pile of boxes and wiped his eyeglasses.

"Damn," he said, as he put the glasses back on, "another pimple." He went into the Men's Room to look at his face.

Boy, it was a lulu, right on his forehead. And the doctor swore his complexion would clear up when he was eighteen. Boy, what a rotten doctor. Charlie examined his face closely. More pimples than he had hair on his head. He rubbed his chin. If only he could grow a beard. Geez, what was a guy going to do? Charlie lit a cigarette, deliberately flipping the match on the floor.

Some day, he thought, inhaling deeply, my face'll clear up—and in the mirror he saw it happening. He'd put on twenty pounds and he didn't need glasses any more, but boy did he need a shave. Five o'clock shadow and he'd shaved only a couple of hours ago.

He was walking into his private office, wearing one of his $200 suits and a pair of $40 shoes. That little sneak Alice was his secretary, and she sat around all day mooning about him.

"Look, Alice," he'd shout, "if you can't type faster than this, I'll just have to get myself a more efficient secretary."

With tears in her eyes she'd mumble, "Please, Mr. Harmon, don't be angry. I'll stay late and finish all the letters."

"All right," he'd snap, "and if you don't make any mistakes, maybe I'll take you out to dinner when you're through."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," she'd whisper gratefully. "Thank you. Mr. Harmon, thank you."

"Hey, Charlie, you gonna stay in there all day," Frank shouted.

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"Plenty of work to do. Come on, boy, get the lead out."

The morning went fast, with only the usual nasty remarks from Frank. "Charlie," he said sarcastically, "I don't know what you use for brains, but I don't think you'll ever learn to do anything right."

"Pick, pick, pick," Charlie mumbled under his breath. Some day, he'd show them. All of them. Those stupid girls outside, Frank, his mother—all of them.

Nobody really understood him. They didn't know what he was like at all. They just saw Charlie Harmon from the outside. They saw a boy, too thin, pimpled, and wearing glasses. Inside, there was a man, and some day he'd be important. Even his mother would see him then as he was. Always sniveling at him. "Your brother Joseph doesn't do this, never did that." Joseph was a fat pig. No imagination. Just because he was going to college and studying chemical engineering, everybody thought he was a genius. Anybody could be a chemical engineer if he wanted to keep his nose in a book all night.

"Hey, stupid, you gonna stare at that order all day?" Frank shouted.

"Loud mouth," Charlie mumbled. He'd show him, he'd show them all.

By noon they caught up with the batch of orders that had to go out "first thing." Frank put on his jacket and left for lunch. Charlie stalled, hoping the girls in Bookkeeping would leave before him.

But no luck. They spotted him coming. He walked past quickly, trying to ignore them.

"It looks like lover boy's growing another head," one of them said, laughing at the pimple on his forehead.

"With him it could be an improvement," another said, and they all laughed.

Charlie winced. Disgusting, horrible sneaks, he said to himself. He wished they were dead, every one of them—the girls in Bookkeeping, Frank, his brother Joe—yes, even his mother. They were all against him, spying on him all the time, talking about him. One of these days he'd fix them all.

The lunch counter was crowded and it was ten minutes before he could get a seat. Even here, people tried to push him around. He heard someone at the other end of the counter laughing. Charles looked up quickly. In the mirror behind the counter he saw the man's reflection. He was with a girl, a tall, slim, pretty girl. Were they laughing at him, sitting there all alone, munching sandwiches? Charlie watched them carefully. Had she turned her head, oh, ever so slightly, to get a better look at his face in the mirror? He glanced at the other people. All of them seemed to be watching him, talking to each other about him.

Why, why, were they all having such a good time, while he sat there

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all alone? Alone, always alone, he thought. Everyone had somebody, except him.

Charlie put down his unfinished sandwich. He wasn't hungry any more. He walked through the crowded streets sadly, aware of all the strangers walking in twos and threes, arm in arm, talking, laughing. They were coming at him from every direction like a giant tidal wave trying to knock him down and drown him. They laughed and their faces would explode with mirth. He would have liked to see their faces really explode. It was a pleasant idea. He looked at the woman passing him, giggling about something her friend was saying, and imagined what her face would look like if all the air suddenly went out of her. *Poof*, he thought, and she'd collapse. She'd shrivel up and get all wrinkled.

He started chuckling and the mood of happiness lasted until he got back to the office.

The girls in Bookkeeping had returned early. Waiting for me, he thought. Any second, they would start cackling. Okay, let them. He could make them go *poof*. They would explode. All the air would go out of their bodies and they would crumple up, shrivel, and die.

When Charlie heard the first titter behind him, he turned around, slowly and deliberately. He watched intently—and sure enough, it happened.

"Poof," he said and walked happily into the Shipping department. He tried it on Frank later, when Frank was talking to his wife on the phone. All Charlie had to do was say *poof* and as he watched Frank disintegrated before his eyes.

Maybe he'd try it on his mother tonight if she gave him a hard time, and Joseph, too. Boy this was great! —he had a magic power.

The subway, as usual, was crowded. Hundreds of people pushing and shoving him. But now he could get even. He made dozens of them explode with just one *poof*. He wanted to tell someone.

"Hey, Mister," he whispered to the man standing next to him, reading a newspaper. "You want to see that old guy explode? Watch."

"Nutty kid," the man muttered and returned to his paper.

Charlie ate his dinner quickly, then put on the television set. It was an old war movie. Boy, was it exciting. Pa-boom—and a whole bunch of people got killed, tanks overturned, buildings toppled.

"Charles," his mother shouted, "turn that set down. Joseph is studying for his exams. Not everybody in the family has time to watch such junk. Maybe if you studied a little, you could amount to something too."

Shut up, he thought, shut up or I'll make you explode. Boy, wouldn't it be great if he could make buildings come down. Charlie shut

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off the television set. He wanted to think. In a few minutes he walked into Joseph's room.

"Joe," he said softly.

"Yes," his older brother said without looking up. He had several textbooks open and his desk was littered with papers.

"Joe, mind if I looked at some of your schoolbooks?" he asked.

"Go, ahead," Joseph said absently. "Thinking of going back to school?" There was a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

For a moment Charlie had thought of letting Joe in on his plans. Now he decided not to. Show his brother *he* didn't need a crummy college education. Self-made man, they'd all say. Charlie was going to do this alone. And his mother, nagging and yelling all the time and telling him he wasn't as good as Joseph—boy, she'd see.

"I don't know. Thought maybe I'd see what this chemistry jazz is all about," Charles said.

He took several books from the home-made bookcase and searched through the tables of contents, picking two that seemed to have what he wanted. He sat down on Joe's bed and carefully read two whole chapters.

Charlie read and reread the chapters on explosives. Not much of it made any sense to him—just a bunch of letters and numbers. He got a dictionary and the encyclopedia, too. And after weeks of study, concentration, and careful work his plans began to shape up. Some things Joe had, others he got in hardware stores and a junk shop. He was careful not to purchase in the same place any two things that would arouse suspicion. Then he was ready.

Who should he try it on first? The girls in the office; Frank, his mother, or a big bunch of people, like what happened in the war movie he saw? Charlie wasn't sure how big a pa-boom it would make. Better try it first on strangers where it didn't matter so much. The subway was probably a good safe place. He could get lost in the crowd after it happened, and boy, would there ever be excitement! If it worked, he could make plenty more, real big ones. Maybe even whole buildings. Pa-boom.

For the next two days he carried the box to work with him, and back home again. There were just *too* many people around. Sunday might be a better day.

He got up early. Checked everything again. Dressed in his best suit. Walked to the subway. It was practically deserted. He got on a downtown express. Grand Central would be a good place on a Sunday. Not too many people, but enough. No sense wasting it. He looked around. Where? Be casual, he kept repeating to himself. Don't tip your hand.

Charlie stepped into a phone booth. A perfect place. He opened the box. Set the knob. Fished in his

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pocket for a coin. Just in case anyone was watching. Dropped the coin and bent to pick it up. Wonderful, he told himself. Right under the seat. Boy, he could hardly wait. Then Charlie walked away slowly. Not too far. He wanted to see what happened.

Ten minutes passed. Nothing. Suppose something went wrong. He started walking back to the booth. Pa-boom. It almost knocked him off his feet. He looked around quickly. Boy, he must have knocked the air out of at least ten people. They were all on the ground. He left fast then. Police would be there any minute. It would have been fun to wait for the police and the ambulance, but maybe they would find out he did it and grab him.

But he couldn't be stopped yet. He wanted to get the girls in Bookkeeping, especially Alice. Pretty Alice, she wouldn't laugh at him ever again. He'd fix her, but good.

Charlie started working on the second one that afternoon. It went much faster than the first time. Three days, and it was ready. He made a bigger one this time. Better try it out again. See how well it worked. Charlie followed the same course. Grand Central. But there were policemen around. A different place. He went to another subway, across town. Perfect. The phone booth again. He walked away slowly, a little farther this time. He watched his wrist watch. Ten minutes. Pa-boom. Wow! The whole station was falling apart. Cement, tiles, everything was falling down.

The third one would be for Alice. Special. He worked fast. Not the office, he decided. The subway again. He followed Alice for the rest of the week, taking careful notes. She took an uptown express. Five stops. Got off. Walked across the platform to wait for the local. Three stops. The local pulled into the station two minutes after the express and Alice always waited for it in the same place. Right near the phone booth. That was it.

If he left the office twelve minutes before her, he would have plenty of time to set everything up. Then, while she stood there, waiting—pa-boom. Down she'd go.

Monday he left the office early. "Headache," he told Frank.

Charlie hurried to the subway. It was all working out fine. Even the train seemed to be waiting for him. Five stops. He got off the express, pushing his way through the crowd. It was much more difficult with all these people. Finally he got to the phone booth. For a moment his heart stopped, but the man hung up the receiver and stepped out. Charlie went in and set the knob. Be precise. Every second counted this time. He slipped it under the seat and walked toward the candy and newspaper stand. Bought a newspaper and waited.

The next train pulled in. Charlie checked his watch. Right on time.

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Alice got off the train. She was walking across the platform. She was right near the phone booth. He looked at his watch again. The seconds were ticking by.

"Now. Now," he almost shouted.

Pa-boom.

He went toward her. Cement, tiles, people were falling. She looked so beautiful lying there. He could not bring himself to leave her. He knelt beside Alice and started to cry.

"Alice, my darling," he whispered to her, "now you understand me." Her eyes were so blue and innocent, and her pretty mouth was so still. It would never be cruel again or laugh at him again. "So pretty," he mumbled, "so pretty, and now you will be good and kind forever."

Everyone was so friendly and nice. At first he was frightened, but the doctor told him he understood. The doctor did not laugh at him. They talked and talked.

Why had no one ever listened. Before?

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES B. CHILD**

TITLE: ***Death Was a Wedding Guest***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik

LOCALE: Baghdad, Iraq

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *It was a night of coincidences, a night that invited vengeance. It was also the night before a wedding . . .*

THE TELEPHONE RANG AT MIDnight, waking Inspector Chafik of the Baghdad police from a pleasant dream. "The tongues of women, and other clamorous instruments, should be stilled at this hour," he complained as he reached over his wife to the bedside table.

A man with a pleasant voice said, "Inspector, I fear I disturb you."

"Sleep is not for the fathers of teething babes, nor for policemen," Chafik answered, regarding himself sympathetically in the mirror on the wall. He was small and dark and had a large head, high cheekbones, and a thin face. With subconscious vanity he studied his proud features.

"The dead will keep you awake tonight," said the stranger.

"A poor jest—"

"I do not jest. Go to the house of Ursule, she who was once wife to Sheik Majid, the exile. There is an arbor in the lady's garden. You will there find—" The voice stopped, then went on, hushed and urgent, "Come, please come!" and then the connection was broken.

The Inspector knew he could not trace the call—the city had an automatic exchange—and, grumbling, he began to dress.

"Possibly a hoax; you may expect me back in a snarling mood," he said to his meek-looking wife.

"Must you go then?" asked Leila,

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with the deference an Arab woman shows her husband.

"Sheik Majid was mentioned. You would know nothing about him, but fifteen years ago he encouraged the tribes to revolt and had to flee the country. There was a report today that he had left his place of exile and might cross the frontier."

"Does he not have a daughter?"

"Yes, the sheik has a daughter by his first wife, the one who died," Chafik said, using this conversation to brief himself. "Her name is Noemi. She was given into the care of his second wife, the Lady Ursule, who divorced him after his disloyalty. Tomorrow, Noemi is to wed—"

"Is to be sacrificed!"

Chafik turned and looked at Leila in astonishment. "She weds her cousin, Tarik," he said indignantly.

"Tarik is a monster!"

"Madame!"

"God," said Chafik's wife, "sometimes touches a man and thereafter he converses with the birds. In the case of Tarik, as all Baghdad knows, the Devil touched him at birth; he creeps with the reptiles. Furthermore, Tarik is not Noemi's cousin, not really. He is the nephew of her stepmother, Ursule, and like Noemi he is a ward of that woman. Ah, what a schemer she is!"

"The Lady Ursule is a matriarch —"

"A schemer, my man! Sheik Majid forfeited his estates when he fled the country; they have been held in trust by the Keeper of Properties as his daughter's dowry, and now they will go to the husband. But as Tarik is Ursule's creature, she—"

"Enough!"

"Poor little Noemi is really in love with that nice Lieutenant Risa of the army, whose father is a parliamentary deputy—"

"Why do I keep records?" shouted Chafik. "All I have to do is listen to you coffee-cup gossips!"

"Then the facts are correct?"

"More than twenty years we have been married, still I walk into your parlor like a witless fly! Yes, it is all probably true—the Lady Ursule will be the real benefactress of Noemi's dowry, and it's none of my business. I'm a policeman, not a marriage broker!"

Leila brushed back the cloud of blue-black hair from her smooth shoulders. "It is dreadful. I hope Sheik Majid is here to stop it."

"How can he? The man is an outlaw and has no civil rights."

"A loving father might be forgiven if an accident happened to the bridegroom."

Inspector Chafik threw up his hands. "Woman!" he said in a terrible voice, and then he saw Leila's smile. "An improper jest," he went on sternly. "Furthermore, your proposition is impractical. Our laws demand financial retribution from a murderer's family, besides his

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neck. If the sheik did what you foolishly suggest, his daughter would forfeit her dowry in blood money to Tarik's next of kin. And do you know who that relative is?"

"His aunt, the scheming Ursule," Leila answered in a subdued voice. "I had not thought of that. My solution was hastily conceived."

"Women are always hasty," Chafik told her.

He adjusted a black *sidarah* on his sleek head, lighted a cigarette, and went out. He was in the street before he realized how completely he had been briefed, and his thin face darkened as, from the bedroom window, he heard a soft laugh.

Sheik Majid's former wife lived on the outskirts of Baghdad, in a district of gardens and fine villas. A breeze from the river rustled the palms, the air was sweet, the sky was brilliant with stars, and Inspector Chafik was almost amiable.

"No siren, Abdullah," he said to the police sergeant who drove the car. "This may be a sleeveless errand and I do not want to disturb a household needing rest for tomorrow's ceremony."

Sergeant Abdullah, a vast and shadowy man, said with the privilege of long association, "Sir, this marriage should not take place."

"You, too?" exclaimed Chafik.

"I have daughters—"

"Ah, yes — three." Chafik shrugged and there was a glint of mischief in his eyes when, in the superior voice of the father of a son, he said, "Daughters are very nice, but it is inconceivable a man would risk everything, including his neck, to save one from an unpleasant union."

"I would make such a sacrifice!" shouted Abdullah.

The Inspector said, "Your pardon, old friend, it was only a test. I wanted to make sure fathers of daughters truly love them. Now I know."

When they had gone a little farther and Abdullah was calm, Chafik said, "I trust the report about Majid is incorrect. He is still politically dangerous and would find sympathizers if he came to Baghdad."

"Also enemies—"

"His implacable enemy is his fomer wife. She betrayed him once and would betray him again. I am concerned for her, particularly after what you have just taught me about the fathers of daughters. She almost invites vengeance."

The thought made him fidget, and he looked around anxiously. They were going up an avenue lined with oleanders. The great dark river was ahead, and the lights of the train ferry crossing it were like swimming stars. There was no other sign of life.

Then from somewhere came a fusillade of gunshots, starting up the cacophony of hysterical dogs that too often made Baghdad nights hideous.

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Sergeant Abdullah spoke professionally, "An automatic, sir. Small caliber, short barrel. It jammed after the third shot. They often do. A revolver is more reliable."

Alertness pleased the Inspector, but he was worried. "My midnight telephone call becomes a nightmare," he said, and leaned forward to peer into the darkness.

At that moment the car came to a sudden stop and he was thrown against the windscreen. And then he saw the sergeant running to a man who had fallen in the path of the car.

The Inspector got out and went to join the sergeant. The man on the ground was young, good-looking, and well-dressed; blood from a head wound was smeared over his face, but it was not a serious injury.

"Struck with a blunt instrument," Sergeant Abdullah said.

"Help him up." When the dazed victim was on his feet, the Inspector said, "Your name, please. I am the police."

"Risa. Ali Risa."

Chafik remembered his wife's gossip about the young army lieutenant who was loved by Sheik Majid's daughter, and so he knew this was the man. "I detest coincidence," he said aloud, but speaking to himself—an unbreakable habit. When he realized he had spoken, he was embarrassed and therefore angry. "What happened?"

"I was struck from behind—that is all I remember."

"Where were you?"

Lieutenant Risa hesitated and then pointed to a grove of citrus trees near the brick wall of a house. "I was walking there," he said.

"An odd place to walk at such an hour. Did you hear shooting?"

"I heard nothing—I was stunned. Shooting? Where?" asked the young man, suddenly aware of the import of the question.

Chafik turned to a police patrol which had just arrived from another direction. "Have you traced it?" he asked the senior constable.

"The shooting was somewhere in this quarter, sir. There are lights in that villa, and I was going to inquire there," the officer said, and pointed his carbine toward the nearest wall.

"Whose house is it?"

"Madame Ursule's, sir."

The Inspector spun around and began to run toward the wall. There was a gate and the hinges creaked when he touched it. His surprise was echoed in the sergeant's gasp; gates are not left open in Baghdad at midnight. They looked into a garden thick with trees.

Chafik saw lights in the house but went down a path to the rear of the garden. "Surely one coincidence is enough for one night," he said.

"Sir?" asked Abdullah, following close behind hid, gun drawn.

"There is an arbor in the lady's garden," Chafik said, repeating

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what the stranger had told him in the midnight telephone call.

They came to the pool, and nearby was a trellis covered with vines. Chafik took the sergeant's flashlight and went to look into it.

A man sat sprawled at a table under the vines, head resting on one outflung arm, back turned. One leg was twisted under the chair as by a violent and suddenly arrested contortion. A stick was on the floor at his side.

There were three bullet wounds, all in the back; it had been a frenzied killing. The Inspector touched the body and found it warm. He thought: If I had not been delayed by meeting that young man, Risa, I would have found the lion crouching over its kill. He wondered if that had been the hope of the person who had telephoned him.

He knelt and lifted the lolling head. The face was trimly bearded, otherwise very much like his own. An odd twist of the lips suggested a smile, as if the corpse said: Well, what do you make of me?

Chafik stood up and turned to the sergeant. "Abdullah," he said.

"Sir?"

"A daughter has lost her father—here is Sheik Majid."

Fifteen years of exile had changed the sheik. Once a heavy-set man, he was now gaunt to the point of emaciation and so changed that he had been able to move about in Baghdad without being challenged.

"Even his friends would not recognize him," said Sergeant Abdullah.

"But an enemy did."

Chafik picked up the stick that lay beside the dead man's hand. It was the sort a watchman carries and had a lead load and brass rings, which made it a formidable weapon. On it there was a smear of blood mingled with a few hairs, and the Inspector said, "Not Majid's blood. This has almost dried. Blows were struck tonight—"

Abdullah's face showed unusual animation. "Suppose—" he began.

The Inspector stopped him. "We are both leaping to a conclusion. Supposition is a policeman's major sin."

"Yes, sir, and you have also taught me to frown on coincidence. Yet a young man with a bloodied head and a blunt instrument—"

"Enough, enough," Chafik said bitterly. He admitted to himself that the circumstances made a case against Lieutenant Risa; and he looked at the corpse reproachfully, wondering why Sheik Majid should have come out of exile to add this final horror to the misery of his daughter's wedding eve. It was inexplicable, and so was the telephone call that had announced the imminent tragedy.

Chafiik remembered the voice, casual, slightly mocking, and tinged with sadness. And then

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there had been urgency: "Come, please come!" the man had pleaded before the connection was broken.

"Too many threads and all broken," grumbled the Inspector. He lighted a cigarette and then stood forgetful of the flaming match held in his hand.

Somebody was running down the path from the house—a dim white figure with dark flowing hair. The light of the match showed huge frightened eyes and a young, graceful body, as she ran to the man slumped over the table.

"Ali! Ali!" she cried. "They've killed you! Ali—"

Chafik dropped the match as it burned his fingers; Abdullah's flashlight came on.

"Not Ali!" the girl said, looking up at them, too dazed by relief to wonder who they were. "But this man!" she went on. "This kind man with the sad eyes who gave me Ali's message—"

"What message?" asked Chafik.

"Ali could not meet me tonight. The man, the one who lies here, stopped my carriage when I was coming back from visiting friends and told me— Oh!" cried the girl, suddenly aware that the man was dead and turning to flee.

Chafik grabbed her arm. "You are Noemi," he said.

"Yes."

"Then you do not know who that is there?" He prayed that she had not recognized her father so changed by all these years.

Noemi said, "He looked at me strangely when we met, just as if we were acquaintances, but I did not know him." The daughter of Sheik Majid shuddered, then wrenched free, and instinctively ran to Abdullah, who held her gently.

"You father of daughters!" said Chafik. Angry because duty compelled him to restrain compassion, he shouted, "Her tears are overgenerous, like monsoon rains!"

"Sir, I protest!"

"Abdullah, she had a rendezvous here—a wayward child trysting on her wedding eve." He tossed away his cigarette. Had the father known about the tryst? Had he tried to stop it and had there been a fatal quarrel with Risa? Chafik went to the girl and forced her to look at him. "You love Ali Risa?" he asked harshly.

With all the defiance of a seventeen-year-old she said, "Let all the world know!"

"Tomorrow you wed another—"

"What choice have I? An Arab woman has no rights! Yes, I marry the creature of Ursule's choosing, but I hate him, and I hate her! I love Ali and shall always love Ali. And she knows it!" shouted Noemi, pointing behind the Inspector.

He turned. A woman stood in the path, watching and listening, a woman of medium build and years, and comfortably fleshed. A chuddar, the outdoor robe of the Middle East, was draped around her shoul-

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ders, but the folds that should have veiled her face were thrown back. She was carefully groomed, handsome, her manner commanding.

Inspector Chafik recognized her and salaamed. "Lady Ursule," he said, and formally announced, "I am Chafik J. Chafik of the police."

Sheik Majid's former wife raised her hand and sent the girl running.

"Madame—" the Inspector began.

"You will attend to your own affairs, policeman," Ursule said coldly. "There has been an unseemly disturbance—shooting—in my garden."

"I regret it, but death is no respecter of property."

"You will go about your work decently," Ursule went on in her insolent voice. "There is to be no scandal." She looked into the arbor and shuddered. "It was suicide, of course."

"What makes you say that?"

"Young lovers are foolish. This Risa, he—"

"Madame, that is not Risa there."

Ursule was visibly upset. "Not Risa?" she said. "Of course it is Risa. Who else would be so vulgarly romantic as to come here and shoot himself on Noemi's wedding eve?"

"One you know, madame, and he did not kill himself." Angered by the woman's manner, Chafik raised the dead face and brutally turned it toward her.

"Majid!" she cried. "Oh, fool, fool!" She drew the folds of the chuddar over her head and fled.

When the Inspector saw her again it was in the house and his men were everywhere, engaged in routine duties. The dawn was spreading over the desert and the chant of the prayer callers came from the towers of Baghdad's many mosques.

Ursule had recovered by now and said, "I regret my weakness. It was the shock."

"So understandable," he said sympathetically. "Divorce is never a successful operation—there is always a trace of memory left."

She looked at him coldly. "You are mistaken, policeman. I have no longer affection for Majid. He was a traitor and it is right that he should be dead. I was shocked that it should have been done in my garden."

The Inspector abandoned compassion. "Why were you so sure that it was Risa?" he demanded. "Did you hear something, see something? Why were you dressed for the day instead of the night? Were you expecting a visitor?"

"You are insolent!"

"And you, madame, are evasive."

"I was dressed," Ursule said, "because I awaited my nephew."

"Ah, yes, the bridegroom. Here it is the dawn of his wedding day, and he has not yet found his bed!"

"Tarik went to a party—"

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"Given by Mr. Rinaldi, a friend," the Inspector said, and absently quoted a police record: "Rinaldi, Hussein. Age: thirty-one. Inherited fortune from his father. Two wives, three mistresses. Entertains lavishly . . . There were at least a hundred guests invited last night," Chafik added, remembering a routine report.

Ursule lost her poise and cried, "You know everything!"

"Duty, madame—"

"Spying, always spying! Yes, it is true I was disturbed tonight! I saw a man in the garden—"

The Inspector was astonished by this sudden cooperation, but he looked at Ursule calmly.

"It was just before the shooting," she went on. "I was looking out of my window, waiting for Tarik, and saw a man run down the path toward the pool."

"Why did you not call the servants?"

"This was not a matter for servants—I thought I recognized Risa. I knew my stepdaughter had been having secret meetings with him! I was about to go and send him away when the shots came. That is why I thought it was his body in the arbor, that he had committed suicide—"

"And you saw nobody else?" Chafik's fingers began to move nervously.

Ursule stared at them and cried, "Will you stop that? I will not stay here to be tormented!"

She turned to leave, but at that moment a door at the back of the room opened and a shambling, heavily built youth came in, escorted by a constable. "He was found entering the house by a window, sir," the officer told Chafik.

The youth had an overlarge head, a flat, vacant face, and thick lips; his animal-like eyes were small and sly, and they stared with panic. Seeing Ursule, he wrenched himself free and ran to her. "Aunt! Aunt! Who are these people?" He spoke in the thin treble of a child.

Ursule turned and shouted at Chafik, "How dare your men touch him! Tarik has a right to be here!" And then she said to her nephew, soothing him, "You are late, so late. Was that why you entered by the window? You were afraid I would scold you? Poor Tarik—"

"I—I—" Tarik began, his lips trembling.

"Yes, yes, Tarik, you were naughty, but I forgive you. This is your wedding eve. Your party kept you; it is understandable. You had trouble finding a carriage? Where did you leave it? Why didn't you drive to the door? Why—"

Chafik said sharply, "Madame, let me do the questioning."

"You would frighten him. You can see how timid he is. And what has poor Tarik done except come home late from his wedding-eve party?"

The Inspector shrugged and looked at the constable, who said,

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"He did come in a carriage, sir. He left it a short distance away."

"He saw the house lighted up and was afraid I was waiting up to scold him," Ursule said hastily. "Isn't that so, Tarik?"

"It was lighted up and I was afraid you would scold me," repeated the youth.

At that moment his shifting gaze stopped and brightened, and he went across the room to a table where there was a bowl of fruit and sweetmeats. His sliding gait reminded Chafik of Leila's description of Tarik: he creeps with the reptiles.

Tarik greedily filled his mouth. His thick lips smacked with coarse delight, and wiping his sticky hands on his clothes he reached toward the bowl again.

Ursule said, "Enough! Go and rest. Today you wed—"

"Today I wed," repeated Tarik. "Noemi . . ." He mouthed the name as though it were another candy, and his hands darted to the bowl again. He went out smiling.

The Inspector could not hide his disgust. "Why tell him he is to wed?" he asked Ursule. "How can there be a wedding with the bride's father dead in your garden?"

"That makes no difference!"

"But—"

"Majid was a stateless man, a rebel—there is no mourning period for him. Noemi has no father. She marries Tarik!" Ursule said, and left the room.

Chafik stood motionless, shocked into silence. But when Sergeant Abdullah entered, the Inspector said, "Surely dogs howl in Baghdad when the Lady Ursule walks the streets!"

Abdullah had news. "We have found the gun, sir—it was in the pool. An automatic, short barrel. When we heard the shooting I said—"

"Only a contortionist pats himself on the back," Chafik said absently.

The Inspector walked over to the table and the bowl of sweetmeats. "Halvah," he said, identifying the pink-and-white confection, and then he surrendered to temptation. "Almond-flavored," he announced, as he took another piece and followed his sergeant into the garden.

He looked at the gun his men had dredged out of the pool and congratulated them on their thoroughness. There would not be much chance of finding fingerprints—mud and water would have smudged them. Nevertheless, he had the weapon sent to ballistics.

They had found the two ejected shells—the third had jammed the mechanism. There was nothing else. The ground was too hard for defined footprints, although there was the faint imprint of a man's shoe near the wall that enclosed the garden.

Beyond the wall was the citrus grove where Lieutenant Risa had walked and had been attacked, ac-

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cording to his story. Chafik was unhappy and said, "Well, the stick that Majid bloodied on somebody's head will have to tell us about that."

He stood in the street for a final survey before leaving for headquarters. It was dawn of the new day—Noemi's wedding day, thought Chafik, and felt compassion and disgust and anger.

He crossed the road to a public telephone box, and something clicked and hummed in his mind. "An excellent view from here, Abdullah," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"One can see both the garden and the adjoining grove. Have this instrument dusted for prints."

"And whose am I to find, sir?"

"That depends. If my midnight caller was human, you may find his. Or you may be rewarded with the prints of the individual responsible for the death of Sheik Majid."

The Inspector got into his car. His fingers were sticky from the filched sweetmeat—halvah clung like glue—and he licked his fingers reflectively.

His office was on Rashid Street, the main thoroughfare of Baghdad. The shutters were closed against the sun, and as the day wore on, the small room became filled with smoke; a pyramid of cigarette butts bore witness to Chafik's concentration.

He was a tidy man and liked everything sorted out before he began to weave his solution, but in this case there were broken threads and he was distressed.

The reports that came in about Risa made an ugly case: the pathologist stated that the hairs mingled with the blood on Sheik Majid's stick came from the young man's head. The Inspector had Risa brought to him.

He was a sullen witness and said, "I know nothing except what I told you." He refused to admit to a rendezvous with Noemi. The evasion was clumsy.

"It is curious," Chafik said wearily, "how the process of breeding an officer and a gentleman destroys the more human instinct for preservation. Take this gentleman away!"

He added another butt to the neat pile in the ashtray. A vision of Noemi's face with its huge frightened eyes drifted in the smoke of a fresh cigarette. In a few hours she would become Tarik's bride, and the Inspector, not a profane man, swore.

Abdullah came into the room as silently as if he had materialized. "You are bursting with news," Chafik said looking up.

"Yes, sir." The sergeant placed the automatic found in the pool on the Inspector's desk. "Nothing," he said. "It did kill Sheik Majid, but as we feared, there are no defined prints. Nothing, sir, except a foreign substance on the butt which is being analyzed."

Chafik could see a whitish smear in the corrugations. He picked at it

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with a penknife as he listened.

"No possibility of tracing the serial number," Abdullah went on. "Illegal entry of lethal weapons into this country, sir. All that. Possibly purchased abroad. Possibly—"

"Abdullah, your real news, please," Chafik said.

"Sir, it is about the telephone box near the house of Madame Ursule. There *were* fingerprints—"

"Ah! So my midnight caller did have a body!"

"Yes, sir, a dead body. The fingerprints were Sheik Majid's." The sergeant dropped his news like a bombshell, but the Inspector went on picking at the substance on the butt of the gun.

"He had a nice voice," Chafik said mildly. "He wasn't a bad man, you know. Too ambitious. Politics." He shrugged. "I have a medical report here somewhere which says the sheik was fatally sick, so the gun but anticipated the sad inevitable . . ."

The Inspector thoughtfully looked at the point of his penknife and the substance that adhered to it. Then he carefully tasted the substance scraped from the gun. He announced, "Almond-flavored."

Suddenly he struck the desk with his fist; his shallow face looked like a bronze mask, and his eyes reflected the fire of the stone set in his signet ring. He said, "Let us go and stop this unholy marriage!"

Noemi's marriage was being held in her stepmother's house. The big room where Inspector Chafik had interviewed Ursule was now divided by a curtain. On one side waited the bride and her womenfolk, hidden from the eyes of men; on the other side sat the bridegroom and his attendants, with a white-robed mullah who inspected documents.

The bridegroom slyly took sweetmeats from his pocket and chewed steadily; his eyes were on the curtain that hid Noemi.

The official finally put away the documents. "All is in order—the contract is correct," he said. He looked at Tarik, sighed, shook his head, and then turned to the curtain behind which the bride waited. "Noemi, daughter of Majid," he said. "Do you accept or oppose this union?"

"It is opposed!" said a voice from the door, and Inspector Chafik burst into the room. "A thousand pardons for this melodrama—there was no time to send in my card."

He crossed the big room, his shoes silent on the fine Bokhara rug; his white suit was crumpled, his polka-dot tie askew. "Reverend sir," he said, stopping before the mullah, "the curtain that discreetly hides the bride also hides the pinches that force her submission."

"Explain," said the dignitary.

Chafik bowed and turned to Tarik, who was fumbling in his pocket for the only comfort he knew. "You went to a party last night," Chafik

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said, "a party given for you by your friend Hussein Rinaldi. There were many guests and you were confused."

"So many guests—" mumbled the bridegroom, chewing.

"And one came to you and took you aside?" The Inspector spoke gently as to a child. "You remember a stranger, a man with a beard, who told you distressing news about Noemi?"

Tarik's round face grew pale. "The man with the beard!" he wailed. "He told me Noemi had a lover. He told me I was not a man unless—unless . . . Aunt! Aunt!" cried the youth, his eyes searching wildly.

Ursule flung back the curtains, saying, "Silence, you fool!" But Sergeant Abdullah was waiting and his dark hand gagged her.

Chafik ignored the interruption. "The stranger told you to come here at midnight," he told Tarik. "And he gave you a gun and warned you not to tell anybody what you were going to do."

"He gave me a gun."

"Then he went away."

"He went away. I looked for him but could not find him again. So many guests. He went away."

"And what did you do then, Tarik?" Chafik asked.

"I came here at midnight and there was a man waiting for Noemi and I shot him and—"

"Aunt came?" asked Chafik.

"Aunt came. She took the gun and threw it away. She told me to go away and come back in a carriage and not know anything—Aunt! Aunt! This man looks at me! He makes me talk!" Tarik cried.

Ursule made throttled noises; she was helpless in Abdullah's grip.

"Your fingers were sticky from sweetmeats," the Inspector said to Tarik. "They always are," he added gently. "They left their trace on the gun—halvah clings, and it hardens in water. But you have talked enough and eaten enough," Chafik added with compassion for the creature.

He looked at the mullah. "Reverend sir, tear up the contract. The law forbids this union."

"That is true," agreed the old man. "There is blood between these people, although it would appear that the sheik arranged his own death."

"He could do nothing else, sir. He was a stateless man and a dying one, and his only thought was to save his daughter. So he arranged that he should be killed by the bridegroom, and then he called me to bring me to the scene of his death—to capture Tarik red-handed. The plan almost failed. My arrival was delayed by Risa."

Chafik fumbled with a cigarette. "First the sheik stopped his daughter from keeping her rendezvous with Risa—she did not know it was her father who brought her that false message canceling the

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rendezvous. And then, fearing Risa would frighten Tarik away, he ambushed Risa and struck him down when he was about to climb the wall to go to the arbor. Risa recovered too soon, sidetracked me, and gave Ursule time to get Tarik away."

For the first time the Inspector looked at the woman. "Lies come smoothly to your lips," he said. "It was Tarik you saw in the garden, not Risa as you told me. You just had time to get your nephew away after the shooting and no time at all to examine the body, which you were so sure was Risa's. What a shock, madame, when I turned the dead face of Noemi's father toward you! Did it mock? Did those lips seem to say, This is my victory? The law will be kind to Tarik, not quite a man, but the law will be harsh with you, madame."

Chafik went quietly from the room. He stopped in the garden to look at the evening sky. He thought how pleased Leila would be with the romantic conclusion, and smiled with indulgence.

Even the gossip of a woman, ground in God's mill, makes a fine, white flour, he thought, and as he lighted a cigarette, he said, "I, of course, am a strong and reliable millstone."

NEXT MONTH . . .

10 new stories including

FREDRIC BROWN's	*Of Time and Eustace Weaver*
AVRAM DAVIDSON's	*Affair at Lahore Cantonment*
FLETCHER FLORA's	*The Spent Days*

and 2 don't-miss reprints

CORNELL WOOLRICH's	*Hot Water*
AGATHA CHRISTIE's	*Hercule Poirot in Hell*

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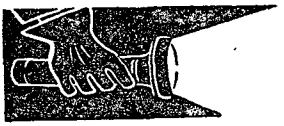

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

EQMM readers, even more than most literate Americans, mourned Dashiell Hammett's death last January; but there is consolation of sorts in the overdue republication of all 5 Hammett's novels, most of them long out of print (Permabooks M4198/4202, 35¢ each): RED HARVEST (1929), THE DAIN CURSE (1929), THE MALTESE FALCON (1930), THE GLASS KEY (1931), and THE THIN MAN (1934)—imperishable landmarks of the detective story.

★★★★ **THE CASE OF THE SPURIOUS SPINSTER, *by Erle Stanley Gardner*** Morrow, $2.95)

When the Old Master is even more devious than usual, the result is the trickiest whodunit of the season.

★★★★ **THAT NIGHT IT RAINED, *by Hillary Waugh*** (Crime Club, $2.95)

Good smalltown police procedure, neat clue-planting, and a murderer as chillingly convincing as any protagonist of fact-crime.

★★★★ **FAREWELL CROWN AND GOODBYE KING, *by Margot Bennett*** (Walker, $2.95)

Adroit, charming, witty, perceptive novel—from a welcome new publishing house specializing in previously neglected English mysteries.

★★★ **FELONY TANK, *by Malcolm Braly*** (Gold Medal s1075, 35¢)

Striking debut of an authentically realistic writer, who makes juvenile crime and punishment vivid and alive.

★★★ **THE GIFT OF ROME, *by John and Esther Wagner*** (Atlantic-Little, Brown, $4)

Sober and absorbing novel of a murder trial in 66 B.C., with Marcus Tullius Cicero as the Perry Mason of Rome.

Classic reprints include Arthur Train's MR. TUTT AT HIS BEST (stories of 1920-41; Scribner's, $4.50) and two Queen books: THE XYZ MURDERS (Lippincott, $3.95), containing the first 3 "Barnaby Ross" dazzlers (1932-33), and THE QUEEN'S AWARDS: FIFTH SERIES (Ace D-493, 35¢), with EQMM's prize stories of 1950 (a superb year!). Indispensable non-fiction: John Dickson Carr's THE LIFE OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (1949; Dolphin C117, 95¢) and Howard Haycraft's THE ART OF THE MYSTERY STORY (1946; Grosset UL91, $2.25).

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Farmer Hodgson goes a-hunting . . .

THE LAST NIGHTINGALE

by VINCENT CORNIER

THE FARMER HEARD THE FIRST jug-jug-jug of the nightingale, and paused. He tucked his twelve-bore gun under his arm and listened. The young rabbits, already playing havoc in the Spring wheat, were reprieved. Whatever the law demanded, one could not stalk the gentle evening fields of England, killing, when the nightingale sang.

Softly Hodgson trod alongside the hawthorn hedge. A broken-down cattle shelter stood in the swampy bottom of his hillside pasturage, its roofless ruin filled with gnarled old elders and spritely young sycamore saplings. The bird would be in there. Each year nightingales nested in the impenetrable growth—that was the reason he had never permitted the shelter to be repaired or cleared out.

Year after year . . . true to its time and place, the nightingale came again to make the nights a glory. He recollected, somberly, that Annie had always known to a day when the song would be heard. Queer, that—calendars did not help: he'd tried and found out; yet Annie had always known.

"John," she'd say, "bet you anything we'll hear the song tonight." And always she'd been right.

Well, Annie was at rest and her wonderful foreknowledge had vanished with her flesh. It was sufficient for him, now, to be glad the birds had not forgotten his lonely farm. He smiled and sighed—perhaps this was what the parson meant by compensation.

For now the bird song was a vibrant triumph. It pierced the early evening glow with tremulous and beautiful melody. All else was silenced, as though to listen. The sound was so frighteningly sweet, so rich in thrilling mysteries, it brought a man to prayer.

The farmer bowed his head. Only last year, on such a night of calm, Annie had also listened.

He reached the limits of the hawthorn hedge by steps as reverent as those of a servitor at the altar. Some fifty yards away, the cattle shelter reared its ruin out of bitter green rushes and a wilderness of nettles. Leaves on the tortured Judas tree were uncurling little baby hands, and those of young sycamore wavered on vermilion-tinted stems. Deep in the tangle the brown bird quivered in its ecstasy, singing to its mate that now were the days of miracle upon them and soon new life would arise.

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Hodgson stood entranced and awed, hallowed by the beauty in the growing night.

It was easy, in this mood, to recall how he had taken young Johnny along this same way nigh on twenty years before. In those days the nightingale was new to these parts. Hodgson thought he could still feel the grip of Johnny's bony little fingers and the throb of an excited breathing over the wonder of it all.

"Mummy says," and little John had turned up a freckled face in which blue eyes blazed, "that—sort of—invisible magic lines are up in the air. We can't see them, but the nightingales and other birds can. That's how they find their ways from hot countries to us, and back again."

"Well, mebbe so, mebbe so. Summat like that," he had muttered.

"It would be God who put those lines there, wouldn't it, Dad? It must have been, mustn't it?"

"Aye, you can rely on that. As you say, lad, as you say."

Johnny had paused a while and then he slowly nodded his flaxen head. "It's so exciting, isn't it? I mean, knowing that it's all *really* true . . ."

Yet no lines had been drawn across God's night to give a homing to poor Johnny when his time came. Out in the uncharted darkness of the sea he had plunged to an unknown grave—he who had no need to go to war, who should have stayed to follow his generations, on the land.

Damn it all, if he wasn't grizzling! That'd never do, that wouldn't. Still, sometimes it fair got a man in his marrow bones to think of days gone by . . .

The nightingale had ceased to sing.

Hodgson wiped his eyes and stared. Never had he known the bird to falter or stop when once launched on its evensong. Then came a harsh small cry—like a child who had cut its finger or scalded itself, the farmer thought. It was almost a human sound, something he had never heard from a bird before—for the nightingale had undoubtedly made it.

The farmer went forward at a run. He saw that the growths inside the stone shelter were agitated. Someone or something was working in there, crashing about in the tangle.

Then a tall youth stood suddenly upright. He had been searching the undergrowth. His ugly face was writhed with disappointment. He pushed his sandy hat onto the back of his head with a hamlike red hand that carried a slingshot.

Hodgson knew who it was: Chuck Bentham, a lout from the village—hawker, pocher, and worse. And now it appeared Bentham had killed the nightingale—aye, he'd killed it right enough. His eyes cleared, Hodgson now saw a pitiful flume of gray and brown

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gently settling on the lower thorns.

Bentham had killed the nightingale—as he had killed the Rector's children's pet nanny goat. As he had killed the Doctor's Sealyham. As he had killed the homing pigeons, the wild goose with the broken wing, the kittens, the puppies . . . Time after time he had been in Court for his cruel acts. As the chairman of the Bench said the last time: "You are a sadistic and criminal fellow, probably more in need of medical treatment than prison sentences—"

Them and their "medical treatment"! Hodgson spat. Bentham was human rubbish. Born wrong, lived wrong, and he'd doubtless end wrong—

Trembling with rage, Hodgson suddenly steadied himself and shouted, Bentham's evil face turned and looked startled for a second. Then there came the glister of narrowed eyes and thin dry smile. Bentham silently mouthed an obscenity, but Hodgson knew what it was, as well as if it had been spoken aloud.

Quickly the youth ducked and pocketed his slingshot. He dropped to the ground and began to creep, with an amazing rapidity, through the rushes. That move was clever in its low rustic cunning. By crawling, Bentham could get into the near hedge-bottom and work in and out of the gaps of bitter hagthorn, where the heavy old farmer could not follow him or even reach through to touch him.

But Hodgson made no move to follow. He merely stood there among the rushes, waiting . . . as once, at the end of that evening long ago, he had stood with young Johnny and smoothed the lad's awed and quiet head. Through Hodgson's thoughts went agonies. All the farmer had left to him was the sweet nightingale—and now the nightingale was dead and its lovely dynasty ended for all time.

Hodgson allowed Bentham to get ten yards farther along the bottom of the thorn hedge. Then the farmer raised his gun and fired when the fellow's head entered a gap.

. . . As the Coroner afterwards said: a man in a sandy tweed hat, crawling along the bottom of a thick hedgerow, simply asked to be mistaken for a rabbit.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HUGH PENTECOST**
TITLE:	***The Sooty Man***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Uncle George Crowder
LOCALE:	Lakeview, United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Miss Millington, teacher of the sixth grade, had three Projects, two professional and one personal. One day all three collided . . .*

MISS GRACE MILLINGTON WAS always referred to as "the pretty one" when anyone in Lakeview had occasion to discuss the grade school faculty. Being unmarried, Miss Millington devoted her spare time to special "projects."

On a crisp fall afternoon with the countryside a blaze of color, an unbelievable thing happened to Miss Millington. Three of her entirely admirable projects met head-on in an explosive two hours which included murder and criminal attack.

Miss Millington's first project was rather personal. He was Mr. Patrick Aloysius Molloy. Mr. Molloy had recently been elected County Prosecutor and had come to live in Lakeview. He was handsome in a red-headed, pugnacious kind of way. He had taken dead aim at Miss Millington before he had been in Lakeview a week.

Miss Millington was moved, intrigued, toppling. But Patrick was the most dogmatic young man she had ever met. He was never wrong. Miss Millington, taking a long view of the future, knew that a marriage would be pretty tough going unless some time, under some condition, Patrick Aloysius Molloy would concede the possibility of personal error.

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Miss Millington's second project was the Grabowski boy. He was the eldest of an impoverished family of twelve children. He had been in constant trouble with the juvenile court, charged with petty thefts on a almost endless scale.

Miss Millington felt sorry for him, because he was without malice. He stole from need—the need of his hopelessly bogged-down family. Yesterday the State Troopers had come to her with the hint that young Grabowski was stealing automobile parts somewhere and selling them to young hot-rods in the town.

The boy claimed he'd found the parts in old Dave Champagne's junk yard up the mountain and taken them with Dave's permission. This needed checking.

Miss Millington's third project was young Joey Trimble, who was in her sixth-grade class at the Lakeview Center School. Joey was a bright, extremely quick, altogether charming boy. Joey's problem was not obvious on examination, but it had been conveyed to Miss Millington by Joey's father, Hector Trimble, the local druggist.

Hector sat in Miss Millington's office, locking and unlocking his hands, which he washed at least twenty-five times a day.

"Most boys are interested in sports," Hector told Miss Millington. "Baseball, football, stamp collecting—or something. But not Joey! He is going through a stage of hero worship which may eventually ruin his life."

"And who is the undesirable hero?" Miss Millington asked.

Hector squirmed in his chair. "That is the problem," he said. "My wife's brother, George Crowder. You may have heard of him."

Miss Millington had heard of Uncle George who had once been quite a figure in Lakeview—a brilliant attorney, county prosecutor, talked of as a possible incumbent of the Governor's mansion. At the height of his career Uncle George had sent a man to the electric chair for murder. Some months later a confession, plus corroborative evidence, had made it clear that the wrong man had been executed.

Uncle George closed his law office, built himself a small shack in the woods, and lived there, hermit-like, with his setter dog, Timmy. He hunted and fished and kept to himself—a sad, knowing man, with a wry humor that made him often quotable.

"Joey plays with no one his own age," Hector told Miss Millington. "Every spare moment he is with George. And George is shiftless." Hector lowered his voice. "I have no proof of it, but it is possible that he drinks to excess upon occasion. Joey—well, he should have friends his own age."

Three quite admirable projects, almost anyone would agree. On the October afternoon when these three projects met head-on, Miss

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Millington had driven up to Dave Champagne's junk yard. She had to make sure about the Grabowski boy's story.

As she approached Dave Champagne's shack on foot, stepping daintily around old automobile engines, old furniture, old iron, Miss Millington saw smoke drifting out through the open front door of the shack. She quickened her pace.

Near the door, with the billows of dark smoke choking her, she saw, dimly, the figure of a man. He was wearing blue coveralls and a blue work shirt. His face seemed to be smeared with soot or a black grease of some kind. This blackened face plus the enveloping smoke made him unidentifiable in that instant. Miss Millington stepped forward.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The man didn't answer. Instead he took a step forward and, to Miss Millington's dumfounded amazement, punched her very solidly in the eye. Lights went off in front of Miss Millington's suddenly blurred and painful vision. She staggered back and fell in the dirt-littered doorway. The man jumped over her prostrate form and was gone.

For a moment or two Miss Millington lay where she had fallen, unable to move. Finally she struggled to her feet and instead of running away went bravely into the smoke-filled shack. Old Dave Champagne, the junk man, lay on the floor of his shack, his head beaten in. A bloody poker lay beside him.

She turned to the old potbellied Franklin stove a few feet from the body. The source of the smoke was obvious. Someone—presumably the murderer who was, presumably, Miss Millington's attacker—had dumped the coal fire out onto the floor.

With her courage still up, Miss Millington went to the galvanized iron sink in the corner. She pumped a pail of water and carried it over to the glowing coals.

As they hissed and sputtered under quenching water, Miss Millington heard voices. She turned toward the door and there she saw young Joey Trimble, backed by a tall old man with a rifle tucked under his arm. The old man had just given a hand signal to a setter dog who stood like a statue in the doorway.

Young Joey Trimble seemed to take the evidence of murder in his stride. His eyes were fixed on Miss Millington's face. The truth was, Joey had a secret passion for Miss Millington.

"Jemus, Miss Millington!" he said. "You're going to have a beaut of a shiner!"

Uncle George Crowder stood there, a muscle rippling along the line of weathered skin stretched over his jaw. He turned his bright blue eyes on Miss Millington.

"Know what happened?" he asked.

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She told him, quickly, of her arrival, of the man with the soot-stained face, of her black eye and the man's escape.

Uncle George's hands caressed the rifle he held in the crook of his arm. "He didn't come down the road or we'd have seen him," he said. "We might still catch up with him if he took to the woods. You hop down to the Hunter place and call the Sheriff, Miss Millington. Joey and I will see if we can pick up the sooty man's trail."

Miss Millington was near tears when she reached the Hunters' phone. She didn't call the Sheriff. Perhaps it was natural that in that moment of trial she called Mr. Patrick Aloysius Molloy. Mr. Molloy, assured that she was safe except for a "beaut of a shiner," promised to be there in ten minutes.

It took him half an hour, because on his way up the mountain road Mr. Molloy and Trooper Gilligan ran into the Grabowski boy coming down the mountain road. The Grabowski boy wore blue jeans and a blue work shirt under a battered leather jacket. His face was clean, but when Trooper Gilligan opened up the leather jacket he saw that the Grabowski boy's shirt was spattered with blood. They dragged him back to the scene of the murder.

Miss Millington was shocked. She had put a great deal of faith in the Grabowski boy. He protested he hadn't been to Dave's that day. He finally admitted to another crime to explain the bloodstains—an out-of-season deer the Grabowski family needed for meat.

"The laboratory will settle that," Mr. Molloy said, grimly. "Those bloodstains came off Dave Champagne, you can be sure. The boy lied about stealing those automobile parts, and he had to silence old Dave."

"You won't make a positive identification, Miss Millington?" Trooper Gilligan asked.

Miss Millington stared unhappily from her Project Number One to her Project Number Two. "I—I thought he was wearing coveralls, not blue jeans," she said. "But they are the same color. And in the smoke . . . His face was black with soot so . . ."

"Take him away," Patrick Aloysius Molloy said to Trooper Gilligan.

They had taken only a step toward the trooper's car when a voice bellowed at them from a distance.

Miss Millington and company turned to look toward the brow of the hill. A man came toward them—a man in a tweed suit, wearing a tweed hat and carrying a blackthorn walking stick.

Directly behind him was the tall figure of Uncle George Crowder, his rifle aimed straight at the man's back. Joey and the dog Timmy cavorted around them happily.

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Even at that distance Miss Millington recognized the town's most influential citizen—Mr. Horace Twining, president of the Lakeview National Bank.

Mr. Horace Twining was in a chattering rage. "I demand you arrest this senile idiot!" he shouted at Trooper Gilligan.

"What's wrong, Mr. Twining?"

"Wrong! I'll tell you what's wrong. I'm walking along the river bank over the hill there—taking my regular afternoon constitutional—when I hear that fool dog galloping up behind me. Then I hear someone shout 'Stop!' I knew they weren't shouting at me, so I paid no attention.

"Next thing I hear the crack of a rifle and my hat—this hat—was knocked clean off my head." He held out the hat, his shaking forefinger poked through a hole in it. "From seventy-five yards away this—this old fool—took a shot at me. Well, I stopped. He walked up to me, cool as a cucumber, and says 'You're under arrest!'"

"A private citizen has a right to make an arrest when he has evidence of a crime," Uncle George said, placidly.

"What crime?" Patrick Aloysius Molloy asked, his jaw jutting forward.

"Murder," said Uncle George, in the same placid voice. "The murder of Dave Champagne."

"Ha!" Mr. Twining snorted. "This man shot at me. It's criminal assault. I demanded his arrest. It's time this old—old *reprobate* had his comeuppance."

"You can't shoot at a man with a deadly weapon," Gilligan said to Uncle George.

"I didn't shoot at him," Uncle George said. "I shot at his hat."

"From seventy-five yards away! You could be sure of hitting my hat?" Twining shouted. "It's a criminal act, I tell you."

"Where did you get the cockeyed idea Mr. Twining killed old Dave?" Patrick Aloysius Molloy demanded.

"My dog followed his trail," Uncle George said.

"You heard Miss Millington's description of the killer?" Molloy asked, grimly. "Blue coveralls, blue shirt, soot-stained face?"

"Yes," Uncle George said.

"Yet you fired at Mr. Twining? Even at a distance you couldn't have made such a mistake. Take his gun, Gilligan. You can rest assured, Mr. Twining, I'll see that this man is prosecuted to the limit." Molloy gave Uncle George a tight-lipped smile. "You see, Mr. Crowder, we've already identified and arrested the murderer." He nodded toward the Grabowski boy.

Trooper Gilligan had been around Lakeview a lot longer than Patrick Aloysius Molloy. He knew Uncle George. He was a little disturbed. He took a step toward Uncle George. His bright young eyes met Uncle George's cool blue ones

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for a moment. Then, quietly, Uncle George handed over his rifle.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Crowder," Patrick Aloysius said.

Uncle George looked at him steadily. "If I was to tell you the Lakeview National Bank is in bad trouble, you'd call me unbalanced, wouldn't you, Molloy?"

"I would," Molloy said.

"Stark, staring crazy," Mr. Twining said.

"If I was to offer you ten thousand dollars for that old coffee can on the shelf back of Dave Champagne's stove, you'd say I was unbalanced, wouldn't you, Molloy?"

"I would."

"And you've already indicated you think I'm unbalanced when I tell you I wasn't shooting at Mr. Twining—only at his hat?"

"At seventy-five yards Annie Oakley couldn't be sure," Molloy said.

Uncle George sighed. "If I could prove you wrong in one instance," he said. "Maybe you'd listen while I broke you down in a couple more."

Joey Trimble was tugging at the old man's sleeve. "William Tell me, Uncle George," the boy said.

The old man's eyes narrowed. "Why, that's a first-class idea, Joey," he said. "Now you go down to that apple tree across the yard. A good seventy-five yards, I'd say."

Joey went off on the run. It was Miss Millington who came to life first. "William Tell!" she cried. "You don't mean you propose to shoot an apple off that boy's head! Patrick!"

"Oh, I'm not going to shoot an apple off his head," Uncle George said. "He'd like me to. Real proud of me, that boys is. But I wouldn't. Might upset his father. I would like to show you, though, that when I say I was aiming at Mr. Twining's hat that's exactly what I was aiming at."

Joey was down under the apple tree and he had picked up a handful of gnarled russets. "Okay?" he shouted.

"Could I trouble you for a loan of my rifle, Ed?" Uncle George asked Trooper Gilligan.

Before Molloy could protest, the trooper had handed it to him.

"Okay!" Uncle George shouted at Joey.

From under the tree Joey threw an apple high in the air. Uncle George's gun rose quickly and he fired. The apple exploded in midair, and so did the next four Joey threw in rapid succession.

Nobody spoke. Joey came running back from the tree, eyes shining. "You hit that last one a little off center, Uncle George," he said.

"I guess I was kind of watching Mr. Molloy out of the corner of my eye to see if he was impressed," Uncle George said, apologetically. "Convinced I was aiming at the hat, Mr. Molloy?"

Miss Millington had a faint smile on her lips. "I'd have sworn you

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couldn't do it, but you've convinced me. Do you admit you were wrong about that, Patrick?"

Patrick Aloysius Molloy flushed a dull red. "It seems that perhaps—"

"Convinced or not, it was a crime to shoot at me," Mr. Twining blustered. "And I'll prosecute!"

Uncle George didn't look at Twining. "Three things I believe in, Mr. Molloy, come hell or high water. The first one is the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. The second one is my ability to William Tell anyone any time I've a mind to. And the third one is my dog Timmy's nose. Timmy picked up Mr. Twining's trail right outside the house here."

"Absurd! Nonsense!" Mr. Twining said. He flapped a hand at Timmy who sat happily beside him, smiling a dog smile. "Go away, dog!"

"You'll find the deer that Grabowski boy killed hanging where he says it is," Uncle George said to Molloy. "You don't have to prove yourself wrong about the bloodstains on his shirt by sending it to the laboratory. It's blood from that deer. Now, about that coffee can. Do you maybe concede I wouldn't be unbalanced if I offered ten thousand dollars for it?"

"I'm listening," Patrick Aloysius said, unhappily.

Miss Millington's smile was now beatific.

"You didn't bother to ask me what I was doing here—what me and Joey were doing here," Uncle George said. "Care to know?"

"Please," Patrick Aloysius said, almost humbly.

"Joey likes to play around here. Fascinating place for kids. Old autos. Old machinery. He was playing here this afternoon. Dave went up to him and asked him to carry a message to me. He asked Joey to tell me he needed advice." Uncle George looked innocently at Patrick Aloysius. "I'm a lawyer, you know, Mr. Molloy. Some of my old friends still come to me.

"Well, Dave did need advice. He'd bought a potbellied stove that was cluttering up the outbuildings on Mr. Twining's place in town. Bought it from Mr. Twining's housekeeper. It was a good stove, Dave told Joey—better than the one he had here.

"So he took out the one he had in the shack and set up the one he bought from Mr. Twining's housekeeper. But when he went to light a fire he found something in the stove." Uncle George's eyes twinkled. "I'll still offer ten thousand dollars for that old coffee can, Molloy. Deal?"

Patrick Aloysius moistened his lips and remained silent.

"What Dave found, he told Joey, was forty-six thousand two hundred eighty-four dollars in cash," Uncle George said. "Dave didn't use it for kindling! He took it out and put it in that coffee can and he sent Joey to me for advice."

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"Gilligan!" Patrick Aloysius said.

Gilligan disappeared into the shack. Uncle George glanced at Mr. Twining who seemed to have shriveled inside his tweed suit. Gilligan reappeared, carrying the coffee can, his eyes as big as saucers. He showed the contents of the can to Patrick Aloysius.

Uncle George broke the silence. "I suppose Mr. Twining came home from the bank this afternoon and got the news from his housekeeper she'd sold that old stove. Now I think you'll find I wasn't unbalanced, Mr. Molloy, when I suggested the Lakeview National Bank was in trouble. I think Mr. Twining stashed a little getaway money in that old stove. He had to get it back.

"So he started out on his afternoon constitutional, only I think he was carrying a package with him A package containing a pair of coveralls and a blue work shirt. Changed into them up in the woods somewhere and smeared his face with lamp black or something. He came to Dave's. Must have nearly fainted when he saw the stove set up and a fire burning in it.

"Maybe Dave recognized him. Maybe he just killed Dave because he had to get at that stove. He dumped the fire. Didn't find traces of the money, but he had no chance to look elsewhere because Miss Millington appeared."

Uncle George drew a deep breath. "You'll find those clothes up in the woods where he hid 'em. I wasn't guessing much, Mr. Molloy. But Timmy wasn't guessing at all.

"You see, Mr. Twining didn't bother to change his shoes. Nobody would notice his shoes—except a dog. A shoe has a very special aroma to a dog. So, do you see now how it was, Mr. Molloy?"

Patrick Aloysius Molloy drew a deep breath. "I was wrong, Mr. Crowder," he said. "I apologize."

"Darling!" Miss Millington said. Then a faint frown creased her lovely forehead. Projects Number One and Two were in good shape. But as she looked at Uncle George, and the small boy standing blissfully beside him, and the setter smiling up at a shattered Mr. Twining, she made a mental note. She would have to tell Hector Trimble she didn't see her way clear to interesting Joey in stamp collecting.

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EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR: BRYCE WALTON

TITLE: *The Woman Who Wanted To Live*

TYPE: Crime and Suspense—à la **Black Mask**

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Bardon had nothing to lose—"you can only fry once." But he was so exhausted he could barely keep his eyes open; and the woman wanted to live—desperately . . .*

BARDON WALKED PAST THE GREASE rack to the repair shop, stood in the dark shine of rain a moment looking and listening. There was no sound except the rain and the wheeze of a generator abruptly turning itself off. The filling station lights were the only ones visible for miles. It might have been a ship on a dark ocean.

Still squeezing his upper left arm with his right hand, he returned to the door and looked at the blurred figure of the blond young man bending over the till. The station attendant was young, thick-shouldered, big. Bardon didn't like the look of him.

He stepped inside. For a moment he allowed himself the precarious pleasure of enjoying the dry warmth as he watched the attendant half turn, still flipping through a bunch of fives. He finished counting, leaned over to jot down the tally on a scratch pad. "Must be getting deaf," he said, still looking down. "Didn't hear anybody drive up."

"Nobody did," Bardon said.

The attendant hesitated; then, as he turned, Bardon drew a .38 revolver from his drenched coat. The young man's eyes flickered from the gun to Bardon's torn sleeve and the dried blood, back to the gun, up to Bardon's pale thin face with its charcoal smear of black beard stubble. He almost smiled in an attempt to dismiss the implications of what he saw; then he took an involuntary step

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forward, his mouth tight with sudden anger.

"No," Bardon said. The attendant stopped reluctantly, stood bent slightly forwards with his shoulders hunched.

Bardon transferred the gun to his left hand, reached out with his right to an empty chain sack lying on top of a row of tires, tossed it into the young man's stomach. The attendant grabbed the sack reflexively and stood clenching it in one kneading fist.

"Put it all in there," Bardon said. "Then toss it over by the door. Then give me the car keys."

The young man sullenly filled the sack, tossed it over by the door. "I don't have any keys," he said.

"I saw a jeep out there."

"Rods out, haven't used it for months."

"Turn your pockets out, sonny."

The attendant turned his pockets wrong side out. Only some change rang on the floor. Bardon pointed to a key hanging on the wall above the cash register. The attendant muttered that it was the door key. Bardon decided the attendant was telling the truth. It occurred to him then that, in any case, the jeep would not be very practical. "You checking out for the night?"

"That's right."

"Better stay open a while," Bardon said. Someone with a big fast car, one that was warm inside, might stop. "You lie down on your belly."

Bardon sidled to the shelves of auto parts where he had already noticed the rolls of friction tape. At that moment headlights from a car turning in swept their beams across the wet glass. The glare glanced in Bardon's eyes. He blinked and at the same time heard the grunt of effort as the attendant leaped.

Bardon's shot didn't stop the attendant's rush. The big young man's weight pushed him on and into the shelves where he tried to stay on his feet in a crash of falling grease clothes, flashlights, tire cement, wax, and cards of windshield-wiper blades. The attendant kept stumbling forward, reached one hand out in an effort to grasp Bardon's neck—and Bardon calmly shot him again.

As the attendant slid across the floor, Bardon ran out the door and almost collided with a woman standing there in a white raincoat darkened with rain across the shoulders. Behind her, parked between the pumps and the station, its lights still on, was an old black convertible with whitewalls.

Bardon opened the car door. A pleasant warm smell of perfume and powder came out, and he saw there was no one else in the car.

He walked back to the woman, his gun leveled, moved past her and back into the station. He slid a carjack over to prop open the door and as he started to drag the attendant out into the rain, the wounded man's hand moved up

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slowly in another attempt at Bardon's throat.

Bardon shoved his gun against the back of the attendant's head and pulled the trigger. He then dragged the body to the greasepit and rolled it into several feet of oil-black water.

Returning to the station room Bardon closed the cash register, took the key from the wall hook, turned the lights out, picked up the sack of money, and went back outside and locked the door.

The woman was holding one hand over her cigarette to shield it from the rain as she lit it. Bardon had noticed several things about her—things one wouldn't expect. She had not cried out or attempted to run away, and her young pretty face was not frightened in the glare of the lighter; nor did her hands indicate any nervousness.

The gaze with which she returned his seemed only curious. Then as he raised the gun, he saw a stiffening of her body.

"You're going to kill me too?" she whispered. She was scared all right, but it was the fear of someone who didn't scare easily.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why should you care when in a minute you'll be dead?"

She exhaled slowly. He stepped closer to her. "I'm taking your car, and this station being closed—maybe no one will bother for a couple of days. You and him both in the pit. Anyway, I'll at least have a few hours' start. If I left you alive you'd blow the whistle on me. You might not, but I can't take the chance. You knew all this before you asked me."

She nodded. "I don't want to die."

"That's a funny thing to say. Does anybody?"

"I care terribly," she said. "That's what I mean—and I mean I can't bear the idea of dying now."

"It won't bother you very long," Bardon said.

"You'll kill me anyway, so I can tell you—that I know who you are."

"My name, you mean?"

"I've been listening to the radio. Descriptions of the men who escaped. One was shot in the arm, it said. Ray Bardon."

"One of our own bunch did it, a kid who couldn't handle a gun. Ironic, you'd say."

"You could just shoot me—like that?"

"You any different from him? You mean because you're a woman? Well, right now that don't make any difference."

"It could . . . later," she whispered.

"I don't think so."

"All I know about your kind of life is what I see on the television," she said, and he knew she was just stalling for time, and that he ought to be heading down the road; but he watched her, his curiosity grow-

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ing. "But how could you just—kill me? I don't understand it. I know you've killed, probably was in jail for killing, so that another murder won't make any difference, but—"

"Yes," he interrupted. "That's on television too, isn't it. Quote: 'I can only fry once.' "

"It doesn't mean anything to you—killing someone?"

"The first one didn't bother me too much and each one since then has been easier."

"Listen, please, Ray—Ray Bardon—you just listen a minute now."

He had been doing that. He felt a bit uneasy about it. Headlights approached, but didn't turn in. The next pair might. The pumps were still lit up and someone might drive in. Where the hell was the switch for the outside lights?

"You're wounded and you must be exhausted. Maybe you're not thinking too straight, Ray. Killing me might not be the only thing to do, or even the smartest thing."

"You're stalling," he said. "Sorry—"

"Wait—take me with you. You're tired. I can drive. You've got a gun, so I won't talk or do anything while I'm with you. Whatever you do with me, do it later. I'd rather die later. Anytime but now. And something else—if you're stopped, wouldn't you be less suspicious if I were with you?"

"Maybe, until you opened your mouth."

"No, I'll keep wanting to stay alive a little longer. That's all I care about."

He was tired, very tired, and he had to keep going—that was true; and if she drove, that would allow him to rest a while. The car was hers and if they were stopped it might be an advantage to have her at the wheel.

She had stepped closer to him. She was saying in a very low voice, "I'll do anything you say, anything you want"—he felt a tingle run down his back—"and later we can stop at a motel. I'll—stay with you, do anything, if you—"

She stopped talking and left the rest to his imagination. She didn't credit him with much imagination apparently, for there had been nothing subtle in her suggestion. He considered her other suggestions, and finally told her to get in the car. She walked toward the gas pump. "I drove in for gas, remember? I was pretty low."

"I'll get it," he said.

"I can do it."

He watched her doing it. Efficient, he thought—a woman who knew her way around.

She drove with a relaxed and skilled efficiency which did not surprise him. He took a waterlogged map from his inside jacket pocket, spread it over his knees, and studied it under the dashlight as the convertible rolled through the rain.

"I'm Lisa," she said.

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His eyes burned. He traced the highway along the edge of the state, noting likely points at which to expect roadblocks.

"Sixteen's five miles up. Make a right," he said.

"Why?"

"There may be a roadblock at the intersection of Fifty-nine and Ten. I'd rather we didn't run into one if we can help it."

"I just came through there. There wasn't any roadblock."

"Look, just—" He stopped and lit a cigarette. The thing was, he believed her. She wouldn't lie about it, he thought suddenly, because if she did lie and they ran into a roadblock he would kill her. And she didn't want to die. Staying alive was her only concern. It was a funny thing. It would have been true with anybody, but with her it seemed to have some special significance. People were different. That attendant back there—he had probably wanted to live, too; but look what had happened to him.

"Sixteen's a bad road anyway," she said. "I don't have chains."

"Stay on fifty-nine then," Bardon said.

His head bobbed weakly. Several times it sagged forward on his chest. He sat up suddenly and shook his head as if angry at himself.

"You must be awfully tired," she said. "You must have walked a long way."

"Yes."

"You've probably lost a lot of blood too."

He looked at the luminous dial of the dashboard clock. Ten after midnight. A dangerous, dull ache was spreading from his arm up into his neck and digging into the left side of his chest.

He stiffened, peered tensely ahead as he slid the .38 from under his coat.

But she had been right. There was no roadblock.

A threatening lassitude seized him suddenly as he saw the emptiness at the intersection. An exaggerated sensation of safety worked against his better judgment as exhaustion pulled at his eyes. He yawned . . .

He twitched upright as he felt the gun sliding from his hand. Lights flickered up ahead, and he was wide-awake again, leaning back, waiting. Lisa drove coolly, once glancing at him, and he saw something in her face—a kind of excitement, a kind of anticipation.

He watched her as she hit the main street of the small town. The town was already asleep. Only a few neon signs flashed on and off lazily. Lisa seemed to notice only the one traffic light in the center of town, slowing down a little, then going on as if she couldn't have cared less about the place.

It was the same driving through Loganville, a bigger town. Then

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they moved onto a freeway and it was the same when they stopped at a toll booth and she took the mileage card.

She could have done something, he thought wearily. His body sagged like a wet sack into an oddly unexpected cushion of security. She could have smashed the car into a lamppost, or driven it into a store front, or yelled to the traffic cop in Loganville. She could have done something, or tried to do something, when they hit that toll booth. But she had said it and he believed it: she just didn't want to die now. Any time later, but not now.

All he had to do was stay awake.

He rolled down the window, let the wet cool air hit his face. It was warm in the car. The smell of her perfume was hypnotic. So was the steady, smooth rolling of the car down the freeway. His head began to bob again. He felt the soft throbbing of the motor, the slight rhythmic swaying of the car.

It would have been worse if he were driving—he wouldn't have been able to stay awake at the wheel. Yet he had to keep going, put as many miles as possible behind him. She was really doing him a big favor by driving. Her suggestion had been a good one; it had been vital to his survival.

"You have to stay awake, don't you?" she said.

"Yes."

"Because you don't trust me. I couldn't expect you to, of course, I know that."

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't let myself trust you."

"If you knew all about me, maybe you would. But if I told you about myself you wouldn't believe it, so it doesn't matter."

"That's right—it doesn't matter."

"Anyway, listening to me would probably help put you to sleep."

"I guess it would," Bardon said. He kneaded the wet flesh viciously at the back of his neck. He pressed his fingers into his burning eyes, felt the spark and flash inside his skull.

"There's a bottle of no-doze in the glove compartment," she said. "You're welcome to them. I don't need any." She giggled softly. "I've never been wider awake in my life!"

He opened the glove compartment, took out a small brown bottle. He held it under the dashlight. There was no label on the bottle. He replaced it in the glove compartment.

"They might be no-doze and they might not," he said.

"Oh, yes, the label got wet and came off the bottle. But they're no-doze tablets."

"They could be sleeping pills too," Bardon said.

"I'll take some," she said. "I'll prove they're not sleeping pills."

"There's only five tablets. If you're used to taking sleeping tablets maybe you could eat twice as

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many and still stay awake. Especially when you're so damned awake as you say you are."

The car continued to vibrate in a regular seductive rhythm. Warmth seeped into him. Tires hummed on the wet pavement and began to roll in his head. Dark walls of night rushed past. No starts, no stops, no turns—just the steady hypnotic rushing . . .

His head bobbed. Several times he jerked his head up and pressed at his eyes.

He saw a sign that said Exit 16. "Take the next turn-off," he said. "The old highway."

"This is a lot faster."

"Dammit, turn off. I can stay awake better, turn off!"

She shrugged. "I wish you trusted me more. But why should you?"

"That's right, why should I and I don't, so turn off and shut up!"

She turned off. It was a narrow road with many curves, and not well kept. The jolting, slowing, and continual turning revived him a little. He felt better, even appreciated the pain excited by his wound—it cleared some fog out of his head.

They drove past a colored neon —*Dreams Motel—Vacancy.*

There was an almost imperceptible slowing of the car as Lisa glanced at the motel sign.

His chin wobbled on his chest. He clenched his jaw and then dug his right hand into his wounded arm. The pain helped.

"Does it hurt much?" she asked. "I mean, is it getting worse?"

"I guess it would be," he said.

"It's probably festering. You ought to stop and do something about it."

"By tomorrow noon I'll be where I can have it looked at."

"We could stop and I could go into a drug store and—"

"But we won't," he said flatly.

"There were no roadblocks back there. Isn't there a good chance they don't think you're this far south?"

"I don't know."

She tried the radio, but it was all static. Lightning flickered down the narrow lane of highway.

"But wouldn't it be smarter to stop at a motel," she urged. "Just for a while—rest a little, clean the wound?"

"No, that wouldn't be smart," he said, realizing with a tingling sensation that once again he had caught that tinge of excitement in her voice. Did she really mean the way it sounded?

No, he told himself, she only wanted to stay alive as long as possible—that was all. And in the meantime if she could get him to drift off into dreamland—

Talking. Aloud. That would keep him awake.

"What could I talk about?" he said suddenly, leaning forward and looking out at the dark wet wall of a tunnel rolling by.

She seemed to ponder his ques-

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tion, then she said, "What was it like up there?"

"Up the river? Pretty good if you like security. Lot of guys like it. They want to spend their lives up there. They beg not to be let out. One of the guys that jumped the wall with us—know something? He did it just to get caught and get a longer sentence. A guy I know was released and he asked the foreman to hold his job and the captain to hold his cell until he got back."

He kept right on. "Another guy had already picked the next job he would pull, even before he got out, and he'd even chosen the judge he hoped would try him. They even have their favorite pens and like the Fed raps best, so they pull a postal job in a place where they'll be sent up to their favorite pen."

He stopped for breath.

"But what about you?" she asked.

"That was my first and last trip up," Bardon said. "That's where we're different. Some things I'd rather be dead than do, and going back up is one of them."

He sat silently for a while, started to nod again, and jerked his head up. "Hell," he said, "I don't know what else to talk about."

"About you," she said. "Tell me about yourself, Ray. What was it like when you were a boy?"

He started to laugh, but there was a peculiar tightness in his throat and for a moment he saw something he had never seen before, never even thought about—a boy called Ray whom he saw now as if he were someone else. A kid laughing at a clown in a circus, jumping over grass to score a goal, diving with other kids into a muddy pool across a misty pasture. . . .

He touched the three stitches in his chin where he had fallen on a rock when he was nine years old.

Then he heard himself talking again. It wasn't as if he were talking to himself, or to anyone he knew—more like someone else talking to him. It was only a rough outline and there was nothing unusual about it. Childhood on a farm, quarreling parents, an older brother running away and writing about interesting places, his parents' divorce, moving to the city with his mother and never seeing her much, joining a street gang, the War, the killing, the G.I. Bill, the garage, business for himself.

"Then," he heard her ask, "how did it happen? How did it start?"

His voice sounded softer, weaker.

"I had this garage and it was doing all right but it was hard work and I knew I'd work that way all my life and never go any farther. One night a couple of punk kids tried to stick me up. There was a gun on a shelf under the cash register, and I killed them both. That's how it started . . ."

"Let me see your driver's license, please."

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"Of course."

It was like a nightmare. The cops were walking around the car. One of them looked ten feet tall in a black slicker shining with rain. He leaned down, looked through the glass at Bardon.

Bardon tried to lift his gun. It weighed five hundred pounds, and he couldn't move. Couldn't lift a finger. Couldn't bat an eye.

A silent scream went off inside him.

He lunged upward and lifted the gun.

The car was moving. Darkness on either side. He looked back. The two patrol cars were still there, their red lights flickering. They had been stopped, she had been questioned, he had been asleep.

She could have had him then, all right. But she hadn't given him away—they were still driving on.

"Why did you do that?" he whispered.

"I don't know," she said in a low voice. "Tell me more about yourself. Tell me how it was after that."

"After what?"

"After the two kids tried to stick up your garage."

"Then I went after bigger things, that's all."

"Was it that you *liked* to kill?"

"No, it just didn't mean anything when I had to do it. When it was legal it was easy, and when I had to do it later on it got easier." He felt his voice, mind, will, all sliding away from him; his head bobbed once more, and he fell back against the seat.

He was going out, despite everything he could do to stop it. Maybe it was more than his just being tired. He hadn't slept for three days, that was enough. But maybe there was poison from the wound. No, he was just knocked out, that was all—he was just knocked out.

But she could have simply got out of the car back there and let the cops take over. She had known he was asleep.

He fumbled at the glove compartment. He got the top unscrewed from the bottle and swallowed two of the no-doze. Maybe they were no-doze. It was an odd feeling—he took them in order to stay awake because he couldn't trust her; on the other hand he was taking her word for it that they were no-doze and not knockout pills or poison . . .

He jerked his head up and twisted in the seat.

The car had stopped. There was a soft sound of rain on the top, on the glass, the warm comforting smell of perfume and powder and closenses.

The wall of a cabin shone fully a few feet away, and to his right was a sign reading, *Motel—Vacancy*.

She was smoking a cigarette and looking at him. Her face was a pale blur.

"Have a good nap?" she asked.

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He glanced at the speedometer. They hadn't gone far after he had taken the no-doze. They hadn't been knockout tablets or he would have been knocked out a lot longer. They were probably no-doze, but he was so beat they didn't have any effect.

"I waited until you woke up to ask if you wanted to rent a cabin for a while," she said.

Again he caught that subdued excitement. As beat as he was, he shared it now, and the idea of hitting a soft bed in a warm room was suddenly overwhelming.

"I can check in for us, Ray," she said, the excitement creeping through.

He rubbed his eyes. Little needles of pain stabbed back in his head. If they drove on he was going to keep passing out anyway. If they took a cabin, maybe he could tie her up in there and that way risk falling asleep. Still, if all she wanted was to stay alive, why hadn't she turned him over to the cops long ago?

"You sign us in," he said.

The bed was soft. He almost went out as soon as he hit it. She was taking off his shoes. She was helping him sit up and was easing his coat off, sliding a sleeve away from his left arm. "Don't bother with it," he said vaguely. "There's nothing you can do about it anyway."

She put his coat over the chair beside the bed. She was taking off her raincoat. She wore a plain dress, tight and revealing, and as she sat beside him on the bed he felt the excitement stirring in him despite his exhaustion.

"Why?" he asked again. "I don't understand."

"Now let me tell you about me, Ray," she said. "I got married when I was sixteen and it was a very bad marriage. I had a rough time and it was years before I got over it. And then I met Fred. It was a wonderful thing, and I won't explain how it could be so wonderful, because I guess I couldn't even I wanted to. We were so happy, Ray. Maybe you wouldn't know about that, maybe you never knew what it was. I'll never know it again either."

He turned his head. The .38 revolver was only a few inches away, pointing at his mouth.

"The boy back at the station," she said, leaning over, her face just above the gun. "That was Fred. That was my Freddy."

Of course, he thought dully, he should have thought of it—Freddy there without a car, no keys. She had come to pick him up.

He tried to move, knowing he never would.

"Why didn't you turn me over to the cops then?"

"You think I wanted *them* to do it?"

She smiled as she squeezed the trigger.

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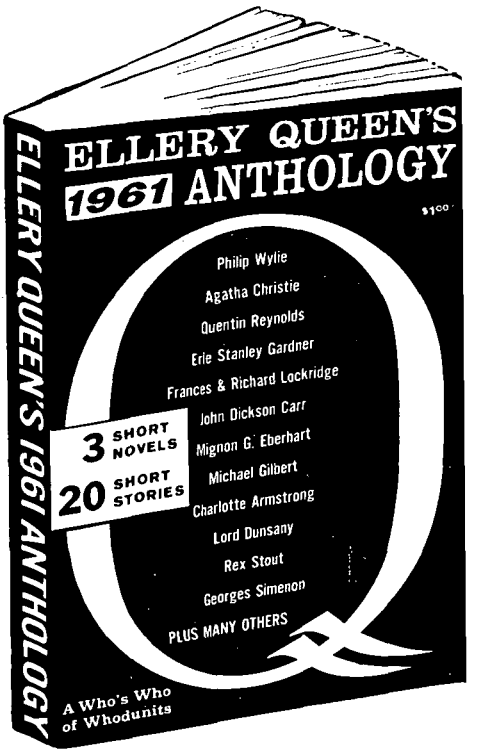

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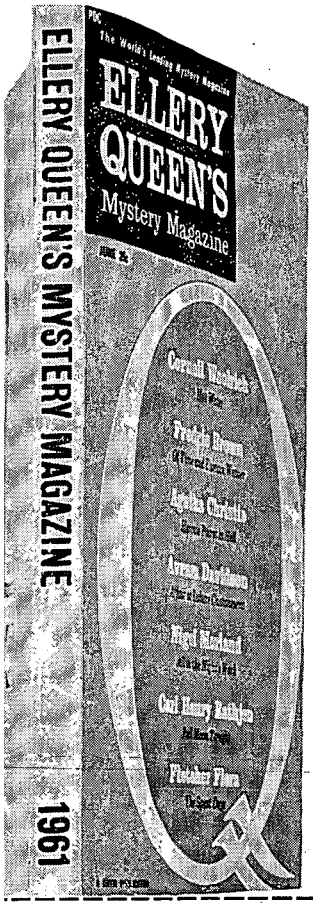

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